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ABDUCTED; OR, THE WORK OF A WICKED WOMAN.

BY RETT WINWOOD.



BEFORE HE COULD STIR, THE YOUNG MAN BROUGHT THE BUTT OF HIS PISTOL DOWN UPON HIS HEAD WITH STUNNING FORCE.

ABDUCTED; OR, A WICKED WOMAN'S WORK.

BY RETT WINWOOD.

CHAPTER I. THE STRANGE LETTER.

BREAKFAST was just over at Woodlawn, a handsome villa situated near Hoboken, only a few hundred yards from the banks of the North river.

The breakfast-room had not yet been deserted. Its occupants on this particular morning of which we write, were a gentleman and two ladies.

The gentleman is the master of the house—Jasper Laudersdale. He sits with yesterday's paper spread out on the table before him. He is a handsome, somewhat florid-looking man, of about fifty years of age.

His wife faces him at the table. Though nearly as old as her husband, she is still a rarely beautiful woman. Her lips may be a trifle too sharply cleft, her bright dark eyes a shade too keen and piercing, but every thing about this woman is in perfect harmony—even to the plain black silk mourning-dress she wears—and the effect, as a whole, is pleasing.

The third person who makes up this little party, is a young lady, and bears a striking resemblance to Mrs. Laudersdale. There is the same grace of movement, the same magnificent dark hair and eyes, the same sharply-cut lips. She is, in fact, Mrs. Laudersdale's daughter by a former husband—Miss Marcia Denvil.

Mr. Laudersdale seemed absorbed in his paper. Marcia and her mother were discussing a ball they had attended the evening before. Presently the door opened almost noiselessly, and a very meek-looking young woman entered the apartment.

This person was Jane Burt, Mrs. Laudersdale's confidential maid.

"Has the postman come?" said Mr. Laudersdale, looking up as she silently crossed the floor.

"Yes, sir."

"Any letters?"

Jane laid the morning papers on the table at her master's elbow.

"Those are all, sir," she said, quietly. "There were no letters."

Instead of looking at Mr. Laudersdale when she answered, her sober eyes were bent fixedly on her mistress' face.

She left the breakfast-room, however, without giving utterance to another word.

Mrs. Laudersdale rose hastily, excused herself, and followed the maid out.

As she had expected, she found Jane waiting for her in the hall.

"What is it?" she said in a low, impatient tone of voice, going straight up to the spot where the maid was standing. "You want something of me?"

Jane compressed her thin lips and looked steadily at her mistress for at least a minute before she answered.

"I told master a lie," she said, at last. "There is a letter."

"For him?"

"For him."

"Let me see it."

Jane put her hand in her apron-pocket and produced a letter, which she gave to Mrs. Laudersdale; then she drew back a step or two, and watched with unconcealed curiosity the effect.

Mrs. Laudersdale uttered an exclamation, and paled visibly as she looked at the letter. It was inclosed in a brown envelope, not over clean. The address was written in a tremulous, nearly illegible hand that seemed perfectly familiar to Mrs. Laudersdale.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "what does this mean? Why is *this* letter addressed to him—to my husband?"

Jane smiled slightly. "That is precisely what I would like to know," she said.

"Hush!" Mrs. Laudersdale caught Jane almost fiercely by the arm. "Explain yourself," she hissed, "what do you see that is strange in this matter?"

"Those letters have frequently come to this house before now."

"Yes."

"And they have, invariably, been addressed to yourself."

The two women eyed each other in silence. Mrs. Laudersdale's color had not come back, and she was even trembling.

Jane was the first to speak. "Now you know why I did not give that letter to master when he asked for the mail. I was not sure you would wish him to see it."

"You did right, Jane. He must know nothing of it."

"Now, or ever?"

"Now, or ever."

Mrs. Laudersdale struggled hard for her composure, and regained it.

"Jane," she said, "you are a faithful creature. How can I reward you?"

"I saw a pearl bracelet at Tiffany's the other day that would exactly match my gray silk," was the ready answer.

"You shall have the bracelet."

"And you shall have every letter that comes to the house in that handwriting, no matter to whom it may be addressed."

"What do you know of those letters, Jane?"

"Nothing much. That they are post-marked Berlin, a village somewhere down on the Jersey coast. And that they are of signal interest to yourself."

She smiled quietly to herself as she answered.

"I should have been ruined if this letter had fallen into the hands of my husband," Mrs. Laudersdale exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of emotion.

"I suspected as much."

"You are a jewel, Jane!"

"I know how to butter my own bread," was the brutal reply.

Mrs. Laudersdale turned round with the letter pushed into the bosom of her dress, and was moving toward the staircase, when her quick eye caught sight of a man's dark, evil-looking face pushed in at a door near the lower end of the hall.

This man was Bill Cuppings, the groom, a person she had reason both to fear and dislike.

He was stealthily watching her. Mrs. Laudersdale paused again, and caught giddily at the balusters. But after a momentary hesitation, she passed on up the stairs, as if she had seen nobody.

"Heavens!" she hissed, between her firm, white teeth, when the door of her dressing-room was once secured against all intruders. "I wonder if that devil had been eavesdropping? I wonder if he heard aught of what passed between Jane and me?"

She sat down by the open window, breathing heavily. Some minutes elapsed before she could summon the courage to read the letter which Jane had so dishonorably detained for her benefit.

"Something is wrong," she muttered, looking earnestly at her husband's name on the dirty envelope. "Otherwise Granny Wells would never have written to him. I fear she intends to betray me."

She tore open the letter, her whole expression changing as she read it. Her lips shut sharply together; her dark eyes shot forth sparks of fire; her bosom heaved; her face became the face of a beautiful fury.

The letter ran thus:

"JASPER LAUDERSDALE:—I have not long to live. But there's something weighing on my mind that I must tell you afore I die. It's a secret that concerns yourself. I must see you! If you value your own happiness, don't disregard these lines, but come at once to Berlin, and ask for Granny Wells. Don't delay, or you'll be too late. And above all, don't say one word of this letter, or of your destination, to your wife. Come, come, come! Don't let me die with my sin unconfessed."

This was all. But the perusal of these lines had produced a fearful effect on Mrs. Laudersdale. She was fairly livid with passion.

"And so the old hag would have betrayed me," she panted. "Ah, just Heaven! it was a narrow escape. I must look to her. She shall not baffle me at this late stage in the game. No, no. And she must not be given the opportunity to send other messages. The risk is too great. I will go down to Berlin myself this very day, and—"

She did not finish the sentence, but the expression of her countenance as she crunched the letter up in her hand was terrible.

After a minute's thinking, she threw the paper on the table and passed into her bedroom, which opened from the dressing-room. Here she made some hasty changes in her toilet. They were scarcely completed when she heard a hurried movement in the room so recently quitted.

Looking eagerly for the letter she had so thoughtlessly thrown down, and finding it not, she darted to the door and flung it open.

A man stood by her toilet-table, leisurely smoothing the crumpled paper upon it.

She ran up to him, tore the letter from his

hand, and made a thousand pieces of it. The daring intruder was Bill Cuppings, the groom.

"You here?" she snarled, facing him like some animal at bay.

He coolly regarded her.

"Why not?" he asked.

"This is my private room. How dare you cross the threshold?"

"I didn't cross the threshold," he replied, nodding his head in the direction of the open window. "Don't you see the balcony out yonder? That is the way I gained admittance to the room."

Of course it was. Mrs. Laudersdale remembered now that she had locked the door on coming in.

"Why are you here?" she asked, white with rage.

"I wanted to see what was in that letter you and Jane were so sly over. And I have succeeded!"

She dropped into a chair, actually gasping for breath. Cold beads of perspiration came out and stood upon her forehead. Bill Cuppings folded his arms and stood looking at her, with an ugly sneer curling his under lip.

"You don't do right in refusing me your confidence, Martha," he resumed in a familiar way. "You compel me to hunt up your secrets for myself, and that isn't pleasant, besides causing a world of trouble. You and I have been engaged in too many questionable schemes to go back on each other now. It is too late in the day to trust me by halves."

Mrs. Laudersdale felt, in every shrinking nerve of her body, that he had spoken truly.

"Yes, Bill," she said, after a short silence, "it is too late, and I will trust you. But not now. I haven't the time to tell you what that letter means to me. I expect soon to have need of your services; then you shall know all."

He looked at her half-distrustfully. "You are going to Berlin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Who goes with you?"

"I had thought to go alone. But I believe I will take Jane."

"Humph! You might as well. I will wait here for your return. If you are not perfectly candid with me then, I shall go down to Berlin on my own hook. And in that case, I may be tempted to inform master of the discoveries I make."

The wicked woman bore his gaze unshrinkingly. "There will be no necessity for that," she said, in a calm, cool tone of voice. "I think you and I understand each other, Bill."

"I think we do," he returned, significantly.

"Go, now, before anybody comes to find you here."

He laughed jeeringly. "It wouldn't be pleasant to have it known that I have the audacity to visit my mistress' dressing-room, and read her private correspondence—or, worse still, the confiscated letters addressed to her husband."

Mrs. Laudersdale disdained to reply to the sneer conveyed in these words. Perhaps she feared to exasperate the man.

Cuppings stood regarding her a moment longer, an assured smile still playing about his lips. Then he turned, vaulted over the window-ledge, and disappeared on the balcony that ran along that side of the house.

When she had taken time fully to regain her composure, Mrs. Laudersdale rung the bell for Jane.

"I am compelled to take a sudden journey," she said, when the maid put in an appearance. "You are to accompany me. Dress yourself as quickly as possible."

Jane smiled, knowingly. "Does master know of this?" she asked.

"No. I shall tell him we are going to spend the night with a friend in the city. Take nothing along. We must not arouse his suspicions."

"Are we going to Berlin?"

"We are going to Berlin."

"Ah," said Jane, "I see."

CHAPTER II.

WHAT HAPPENED AT BERLIN.

It was already dark when Mrs. Laudersdale, accompanied by her maid, reached her destination.

On the way from New York she had confided to the faithful but unscrupulous Jane as many as she dared of her reasons for taking this sudden journey to Berlin.

The night was bright with starlight when the two women wended their way upward from the low-browed inn squatted on the bleak Jersey shore, where the stage-coach had left them.

Before them, as they hurried on, the night seemed to drop down curtain after curtain of

opaque darkness, through which all material objects looked ghastly and spectral; at no great distance the worn and haggard tide came tramping in with a low but thunderous tread.

However, Mrs. Laudersdale took no notice of external objects. Keeping fast hold of Jane's hand, she hurried onward through the darkness with a fierce, almost manlike stride, that plainly betrayed the intensely excited state of her mind.

"Good God!" she muttered, between her shut teeth. Granny Wells may already have told my secret to that pink-faced girl. She may have told it to others!"

"To what girl do you refer?" asked Jane, not a little surprised. "You have told me of none."

"I had reference to the old woman's granddaughter, Mabel Trevor," replied Mrs. Laudersdale, though not without a show of hesitation.

Jane merely gave utterance to an expressive "humph!"

"There's the house," said Mrs. Laudersdale, presently, pointing out a gleam of light faintly perceptible through the furzy bushes that now obstructed their way. "Keep your wits about you, Jane. There's no telling to what desperate measures the old hag may drive us."

They approached the hovel—for it was scarcely more than that—and Mrs. Laudersdale, who seemed perfectly familiar with the premises, pushed open the door without the slightest hesitation.

The next instant the two women found themselves in a miserable little room furnished with a pallet-bed, a deal table, and some dilapidated chairs.

Upon the bed a wretched old woman was lying—a horribly ghastly skeleton, with a skin yellow as parchment, sunken, lusterless eyes, bloodless lips, and a mass of gray, unkempt hair flooding the pillow.

The clammy dampness of approaching dissolution was already gathering on the brow of the pitiable creature.

On the hard floor by the bedside knelt a young girl of some seventeen years of age, who was such a miracle of grace and beauty as to seem strangely out of place in that miserable hole.

She had a sweet, star-like face, with a skin like wax in its creamy whiteness, eyes blue as a fringed gentian growing on some shady bank, lips tinged of a sumptuous carmine, and a profusion of silky hair that fell away from her brow to roll over her alabaster shoulders in a torrent of dull, dead gold.

Of course this was the girl to whom Mrs. Laudersdale had referred when she spoke of Mabel Trevor.

She started quickly to her feet, a flush of surprise overspreading her lovely face as the intruders burst so unceremoniously into the hut.

Their appearance had a still more startling effect on the old woman. She suddenly raised herself from the pillow, and fixing her filmy eyes on Mrs. Laudersdale's face, screamed out, in a loud, shrill voice:

"Woman! fiend! why are you here?"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Laudersdale, sternly, as she approached the bed. "I came to see you."

A singular change swept over the features of the poor, dying wretch. She fell back on the pillow again. "It was Jasper Laudersdale I wanted to see," she moaned. "Not you—not you."

"I know that very well."

"I sent him a letter. Devil, temptress, you didn't dare—"

"He never received that letter," interrupted Mrs. Laudersdale, coolly, after having glanced searchingly round the apartment to make sure that nobody was present save the girl and Jane.

"Oh, God forgive me!"

"You intended to betray me, Granny Wells. You would have told my husband everything. With one word you would have destroyed the cherished scheme of years."

"Yes," said the old woman, "I would have told him everything. I've been wicked, wicked. And you, fiend that you are," shaking her skinny fist in Mrs. Laudersdale's face, "have been my evil genius. You've tempted me to do wrong when I wouldn't have thought of such a thing but for you. Oh, let me atone, for God's sake, let me atone, so far as is in my power before I die!"

Mrs. Laudersdale put her lips close to the ear of the dying sinner. "What do you mean by that word 'atone'?" she whispered. "How would you atone?"

"By tellin' your husband the truth, as I said afore. And by lettin' Mabel know just who and what she be."

"Does she not know already?"

"No. I felt tempted to tell her. But it seemed best to wait until he, Jasper Laudersdale, was here. And I waited."

Her listener lowered the lids of her cunning eyes to conceal the gleam of triumph and relief that came into them.

"It is well," she said.

"I shall tell her now!" cried out Granny Wells, in a loud, shrill tone of voice. "I'm dying. And I ain't going to the other world with that sin unconfessed."

Mrs. Laudersdale seemed to consider for a moment. She realized the full extent of the danger that threatened herself and the success of her most cherished schemes if Granny Wells was permitted to make known to Mabel Trevor the guilty secret that lay between them. But not a muscle of her face moved to betray the dark thoughts that were passing in her mind.

"Yes, it is best that Mabel should know everything," she said, presently, in a voice audible only to the dying woman. "I give up the game. But, before you make a confession, I have something to say to you. Send the girl away for a few minutes."

Granny Wells looked distrustfully into the face which was bent so near to her own. It looked calm, imperturbable, almost indifferent. Her doubts seemed to vanish in a moment.

"Mabel may leave us alone," she said, wearily.

Mrs. Laudersdale communicated the permission to the girl herself, who stood at a little distance, regarding them with wondering looks. She instantly came a step or two nearer the bed.

"Do you really wish me to go away for a few minutes, Granny?" she said.

The old woman nodded her head.

She sighed and seemed unwilling to stir. "I shall not go far," she said, at last, giving Mrs. Laudersdale a significant and distrustful glance.

She then threw a shawl over her head, reluctantly approached the door, and went out into the clear, starlight night.

For some seconds after her departure not a word was spoken in the hovel. Mrs. Laudersdale sat by the bedside, her face showing ghastly pale in the feeble light afforded by the sputtering tallow candle on the table. The corners of her mouth twitched nervously, in spite of all her efforts at self-control.

"Speak out," said Granny Wells, at last. "What do you want to say to me?"

Mrs. Laudersdale rose up slowly, and moved to the foot of the bed where Jane was standing, the picture of stolid indifference. "Don't fail me now," she said, in a sharp whisper.

"I had no thought of failing you," muttered Jane, in response.

The guilty woman drew near the bedside once more. "I deceived you just now," she said, sullenly. "I never meant to give my consent that the confession should be made. Fool, do you think I would have taken this journey here had I been so indifferent as that? No, no. And it was to tell you this that I had Mabel sent from the house."

Granny Wells threw up both her arms with a frightened moan.

"Treachery, treachery!"

"Call it what you will. The name does not matter to me. But I could not have my secret proclaimed after all these weary years of struggling to keep it. I tell you that I could not."

"Call Mabel back—call the girl back," cried the unhappy woman. "No matter what it may cost you, I can't die until she knows the truth."

Mrs. Laudersdale wildly wrung her hands.

"I am lost, ruined, if you tell."

"I must tell."

"You shall not," and she threw herself on the couch beside the dying woman. "You shall not!" she hissed, between her clenched teeth. "I'll strangle you sooner. I'll take the miserable remnant of life that is left in your still more miserable body."

"Off, off! I can't die—I won't die without telling."

"Would you drive me desperate?"

Her beautiful ringed hands clutched fiercely at Granny Wells' throat. She looked like some furious tiger-cat springing upon its victim with all its claws spread out. Her breath came and went in short, quick gasps, her bosom heaved, her dark eyes shot forth sparks of fire.

"Woman!" she hissed, "you shall never live to bring ruin and disgrace upon me!"

"Murder! Mer—"

The shrill, frightened cry was stifled almost at its birth by those white fingers encircling the unhappy woman's throat.

"Quick!" cried Mrs. Laudersdale. "The door, Jane. Hold the door."

The maid sprung forward, dropped her hand over the latch, and with all her strength held it in place so that it would be impossible for any one to raise it from without.

Mrs. Laudersdale's murderous grasp on Granny Wells' throat tightened more and more.

At that moment she only thought of the fearful consequences to herself if the dying woman was permitted to tell her story.

Ruin, disgrace, loss of position, the world's scorn, with the finger of contempt directed at her.

The result of the struggle meant all that to her. It is not strange that, for the moment, she was little better than a mad-woman.

Such a contest could not last many seconds. The guilty woman's victim grew purple in the face, there was a strange and horrible contraction of the muscles, a long, gasping sigh, and then all was still.

Mrs. Laudersdale staggered to her feet, trembling in every limb.

"She's dead," she muttered, putting up both her hands as if to shut out the horrible sight.

Jane had managed to secure the latch of the door with a nail which she had broken off from the wall where it was driven. She now sprung to the bed, and hurriedly removed all signs of the struggle that had just taken place.

"Compose yourself," she cried, in a stern whisper, "compose yourself, or all is lost."

Thus exhorted, Mrs. Laudersdale dropped into the nearest chair, and after one or two ineffectual efforts, succeeded in controlling the violent trembling that had seized upon every limb.

Not an instant too soon, however. A step was heard outside, a hand laid on the latch, and the door was violently shaken.

"Why have you fastened me out?" cried the sweet, half-frightened voice of Mabel Trevor. "Quick, quick! Open the door to me."

Jane drew out the nail, and flung it from her. Then she lifted the latch. "The door must have stuck," she muttered. "Come in quick, miss. I fear the old woman is dead."

Mabel entered the hut, looking very pale and evidently laboring under some strong excitement. She went straight up to the bed, until her gaze fell upon the still but ghastly countenance of the woman lying there.

"Granny's dead!" she exclaimed; then, in a loud, scared voice, "and you, you," turning suddenly upon Mrs. Laudersdale, "have killed her."

The guilty creature could not utter one word of denial. The suddenness of the accusation seemed to paralyze her.

"You have killed her," Mabel repeated, wildly. "Oh, fool that I was to trust her alone with you."

Jane came to the rescue of her mistress.

"You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, miss," she said, sullenly. "I don't listen to such talk as that when addressed to my mistress. The poor lady was trying to tell something or other, and just gave a gasp of a sudden, and so died. That's the long and short of the matter."

"I heard her cry out."

"Very likely you did. Dying folks are noted for screeching."

"I heard her cry murder," said Mabel, still glancing distrustfully from one to the other of the strange women.

"Bah! That was all imagination. You heard nothing of the sort."

"The door was held on me."

"It stuck fast, that is all."

Jane's answers had all been given with a pert readiness that might well have deceived a much shrewder observer than Mabel Trevor. But that young lady was far from being convinced that everything was as it should be.

"There is some secret which you are trying to hide from me," she exclaimed, almost wildly; "and it is a secret which burdened that poor dead woman's conscience, and which she was anxious to tell. You are making me the victim of some foul wrong or other."

Mrs. Laudersdale now roused herself and looked at the girl anxiously. "Who is?" she asked.

"You, Mrs. Jasper Laudersdale."

The guilty woman started out of her chair. "Ha! do you know me?"

"As an enemy—yes."

"What do you know?" she snarled, grinding her white teeth viciously.

"Granny Wells was no kin of mine. I have every reason to believe that you, to serve some nefarious purpose of your own, gave me into her keeping as a child. And I also know that your husband, if I could once gain speech with him, would befriend me."

"Who told you such a falsehood?"

"Granny Wells, not an hour since."

Mrs. Laudersdale's fingers twitched convulsively. She was advancing toward the helpless girl, much as a tiger-cat steals upon its prey, when Jane stretched forth her trembling hand and laid it on the woman's arm.

"Have a care," she whispered, with her lips close to her mistress' ear. "You shall not kill her! You've done devil's work enough for one night. Come away."

Mrs. Laudersdale suffered Jane to lead her to the door of the hovel. On the threshold, the latter paused to look back and speak a last word.

"You are very unjust to my mistress," she said. "I think you will learn your mistake, miss, and come to regret it. Under existing circumstances, of course it cannot be pleasant to my lady or yourself for us to remain longer under this roof. We go to the inn down on the beach, and will send back help to look after the dead."

Mabel had flung herself in a chair by the bedside.

"You need not trouble yourself," she said, wearily. "Some of the neighbors have promised to come in to watch with me. They must be here pretty soon, and I am not afraid."

"Hum! Good-night, miss."

The door closed, and Jane and her mistress walked rapidly away in the darkness.

CHAPTER III.

THE LONE HOUSE IN THE WOOD.

THREE days subsequent to her sudden death, Granny Wells was buried.

During the interval Mabel Trevor remained quietly at the hovel, accepting with a grateful heart the rough, but kindly-meant, attentions of her neighbors.

She was shrewd enough to keep to herself the suspicion that Granny Wells had been helped out of the world. The ignorant fishermen noticed nothing peculiar in the appearance of the dead; they would have pronounced Mabel unsettled in her mind if she had even hinted the horrible thoughts that were continually distressing her.

Unfortunately for Mabel, nobody had seen Mrs. Laudersdale and Jane leave or enter the hut. She could not prove that they had been there at all.

Nevertheless, she had secretly made up her mind to follow them to their home at the earliest practicable moment, charge them with having hastened the old woman's exit from the world, and by this means, perhaps, wrest from Mrs. Laudersdale the secret that seemed so intimately to concern herself.

That wicked woman evidently knew the true story of her birth, and she felt that she could not rest until it had been forced from her guilty lips.

As a guide to her future movements, she merely knew that Mrs. Laudersdale resided at a country seat called the Woodlawn, near Hoboken.

It should be her first duty to find Woodlawn. She waited until the wretched old woman, who was the only friend she had ever known in the world, had been consigned to the grave, before attempting to put her design into execution.

The simple funeral took place at twelve o'clock. After the last of her humble neighbors had left the house, Mabel hastily equipped herself for the journey to New York.

It was several miles to the nearest railway station, and the only stage connecting with it left at an early hour of the morning. Rather than remain another night at the wretched hovel, Mabel determined to mount the only horse that Granny Wells possessed, and so reach the station in that manner.

She had money enough to take her to New York, and support herself there in very humble lodgings for several weeks.

It was mid-afternoon when she locked the door of the hut and mounted the gray mare that was to convey her over the first stage of her journey.

The hot, stirless air was full of summer scents and sounds, as she rode along the pleasant country road. After the lapse of an hour or two, she suddenly became aware that a man was following her.

He, too, was on horseback. From the occasional glimpses she caught of his figure he seemed to be a stout, heavily-built fellow; but he kept too far in the rear for her to distinguish his features.

Why was he following her?

She could not doubt but that she was really

the object of his pursuit. If she whipped up the gray mare and sought to elude him in that way, he worried his own beast into a gallop; or if she suffered the mare to walk, he copied her example even there, and always maintained the same distance between them—never lessening it, and never suffering it to widen.

She grew nervous and frightened at last, at being followed so persistently. She might have stopped at one of the many farm-houses on the road, and got rid of him in this manner, but her overwhelming desire to reach New York at the earliest practicable moment prevented her from doing anything of the sort.

The way grew lonelier and wilder, and the sun dropped low in the western heaven. Mabel presently reached two cross-roads, where she paused in some perplexity, not knowing which of the two to take.

Finally selecting that leading to the right, she hurried on. Looking back after the lapse of some fifteen or twenty minutes, she observed that her unknown pursuer had chosen the same road, and was now slowly gaining upon her.

She whipped up her mare, wishing, now that it was too late, that she had been less daring. Swiftly she sped along the uneven ground for some distance, but was suddenly compelled to draw rein on the bank of a river; for the bridge was gone.

There had been a heavy rain the night before and the stream looked sullen and turgid.

Could she ford it?

It looked like a dangerous undertaking. While she hesitated there came a clattering of hoofs close behind her, and a hand was suddenly stretched toward her horse's head, and a gruff voice said "Good-evening, miss."

Her heart bounded violently. She turned and looked at the man, knowing well he was the same who had been following her so long.

He was a powerful fellow, with a dark, evil-looking face, the nose long and sharp and of a vulture-like curve, the eyebrows thin and bristling, the dark eyes sinister in their expression, and the narrow chin protruding in a very disagreeable manner.

In short, he was just the sort of person a defenseless man or woman would shrink from meeting in a lonely place.

Though Mabel's blood ran cold in her veins, she managed to maintain her self-possession.

"Good-evening, sir," she returned, civilly, in answer to his salutation.

"Are you going to cross the river?" he asked, still keeping his hand on her bridle-rein.

"I am."

"It is dangerous to cross at this point. I hurried on to tell you so. There is quite an undertow when the river is swollen so much as at present."

"What am I to do?" she asked, helplessly.

"There's a bridge just below," he said, fixing his strange eyes upon her face.

"I don't know where to find it."

"I will guide you. It is only a little way."

"That bridge may be gone, too," she cried, sharply. "The freshet may have taken it away."

"Of course; but I hardly think it is. Come along. I'm going that way myself."

He turned her horse's head, even as he spoke, and began to lead the way along the bank of the river. Mabel had no time for remonstrance. It would not have availed her, perhaps, in any event.

The rosy flush of sunset faded from the sky, as they proceeded, and the purple shadows of twilight began to gather darkly around them.

Mabel fell back with terror; but the man's grasp was still on the bridle-rein, and she could not hope to break away from him. He had been very civil thus far, but she could not help distrusting him.

If he meant mischief, the place was lonely and wild, and he must have everything his own way.

He scarcely spoke. At last they reached the bridge of which mention had been made. And there he paused and looked at her keenly by the last glimmering light of day.

"The woods on the other side are dark and lonely, miss," he said. "We must keep together, or you will surely lose your way."

"I would rather go back," she returned shivering, as she glanced into the black depths of shade that seemed to be opening before them.

"Humph. You would gain nothing. There are woods on either hand, as you can see for yourself."

She clasped her hands in dread unutterable.

"Oh, I wish I hadn't come," she murmured.

"Let go your rein," he said, gruffly. "The way is narrow and dark. I'll lead you."

There seemed no other way than to submit. They resumed their journey. The woods grew darker and more impenetrable as they advanced. Great trees closed thickly about them. Poor Mabel could scarcely see her hand before her.

The man pushed on in sullen silence, leading the gray mare by the bridle. At last he emerged into a small clearing, and much to her delight, the frightened girl beheld dimly through the dark, a long, low building, the sides of which were pierced with several small windows.

"Here," she thought, "I may find friends and a refuge."

The building looked solitary and dark, however, as they drew near.

"Dismount!" said the man, in a stern voice, as they drew up before the door.

All hope died in her heart as she noticed his tone and manner. Trembling in every limb, she slid to the ground. Seizing firmly hold of her hand, he led her into the house, leaving the horses to graze at will on the diminutive lawn.

Within, every thing was wrapped in impenetrable darkness. The man hastily struck a match, and, like one perfectly familiar with the premises, approached a rude sort of chimney-piece, where he found a candle, which he lighted.

By the aid of its friendly rays, Mabel saw that she was in a small, smoke-begrimed apartment, very rudely furnished.

She looked eagerly at her companion.

"Do you live here?" she asked.

"No," he returned, with a strange smile. "I live in the suburbs of New York. But I have frequently been to this place before."

"In New York?" she echoed. "I am going there."

"Indeed?" Again that singular smile curled his lips. "May I ask what takes you to the city?"

"I go there to find a wicked woman who knows some secret concerning me that I am anxious she should divulge."

"You mean Mrs. Laudersdale?"

Mabel gave a start of surprise.

"Do you know her?" she exclaimed.

"Yes. And I also know that she does not wish you to come to Woodlawn."

There was no mistaking the sneering tone in which those words were uttered. A sudden suspicion flashed with lightning-like rapidity upon Mabel's mind.

"Who are you?" she cried, sharply. "Why have you dogged my footsteps all the way from Berlin?"

"One question at a time, miss, if you please. My name is Bill Cuppings. I live at Woodlawn."

It was indeed that strange and terrible man who had been leagued with Mrs. Laudersdale in so many crimes that had never come to the light of day.

Mabel's heart died within her. This man could have had but one object in following her so persistently, and in conducting her to this lonely spot. His very next words verified the horrible suspicion that had crossed her mind.

"You are in Mrs. Laudersdale way," he said.

brutally. "In short, you have it in your power to cause her no end of trouble. Like a clever woman—and my mistress is remarkably clever where her own interests are concerned—she determined, shortly after returning from her recent visit to Berlin, to put you out of the way of harassing her. Not to put too fine a point on it, you know too much for her safety."

"Oh, just Heaven!"

"As I said before, she wishes to be rid of you. And I am selected as the humble instrument to accomplish her purpose."

Mabel recoiled from him in horror.

"You would not murder me?" she cried.

"Bah! I've cut prettier throats than yours in my day," sneered the ruffian.

"I never harmed you."

"That is true. But it is as a business transaction that I regard this matter. My mistress hired me to do a certain piece of work, and I am bound to do it."

"She hired you to kill me?"

"You have said it," sneered the ruffian. "It isn't the first transaction of the sort I've been engaged in for her sake."

Mabel threw up her clasped hands in a gesture of piteous entreaty.

"Have you no mercy?" she moaned. "I am young, and life is sweet. It is very hard to die."

Bill did not seem to be touched in the least by her misery.

"I'd like to spare you," he said, coolly, wiping the perspiration from his face, "but my wishes are not to be regarded in this matter. I might have shot you down like a dog, on the way

father. But I preferred to spare your life till we reached this spot."

"There are signs of habitation in this room," cried Mabel. "You dare not harm me. The person who lives here may return at any moment, in which case I shall claim his protection."

Bill laughed jeeringly.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he snarled. "It is a friend of mine who occupies this house; otherwise I should never have come here. I don't know why he is absent at this present moment, and I don't care how soon he returns. He will take sides with me, and not with you."

She knew by the tone in which he uttered these words that he had spoken truly. Driven nearly frantic with desperation and fear, she bounded toward the door, giving him a violent push with both hands as she passed him.

He staggered a little, at first; but, recovering his balance almost immediately, he sprung upon her with the agility and ferocity of a wolf, just as her trembling fingers dropped upon the latch of the door.

"You shall not escape me now," he howled, giving utterance to a volley of the most fearful curses.

Obedying the most natural impulse in the world, Mabel uttered a succession of piercing screams for assistance.

"Yell away!" said Bill, savagely, as he dragged her backward from the door. "There's nobody to hear. And you'll never have a chance to try your lungs again in this lower world."

CHAPTER IV.

FRIEND AND FOE.

THESE words had scarcely passed the villain's lips when the door was pushed suddenly and violently open, and a young man dashed into the apartment.

"Don't be too sure of that!" he exclaimed, drawing a pistol from the breast pocket of the hunting-jacket he had on, as he sprung to Mabel's rescue.

Bill Cuppings turned to confront the intruder. But he was taken wholly unawares by the suddenness of the unexpected onslaught. Before he could stir from his tracks, the young man had brought the butt of the pistol he carried down upon his head with stunning force.

The villain reeled, caught helplessly at the empty air, and fell like a log to the floor.

As Mabel turned, her heart full of gratitude to thank her deliverer, an exclamation of surprise escaped her lips.

"Philip Jocelyn! Is it possible?"

The young man echoed her cry. "You, Mabel, you? I can scarcely believe the evidence of my senses."

He did, indeed, look very much bewildered.

"I heard your cry for help," he added, hastily. "But I had not the slightest idea to whose assistance I was hurrying."

He was a tall, handsome fellow, of some twenty-two years of age. His face was the type of a manly beauty, the features being regular and full of a noble resolution and unflinching courage. In brief, his was the sort of countenance to inspire instinctive trust.

And thus did Mabel Trevor interpret its varying expression. It was merely the recognition of one noble soul by another.

She had met Philip Jocelyn the previous summer while he was on the Jersey coast for a month's fishing and hunting.

Congeniality of tastes in most respects had brought them frequently together during those four happy weeks. When the brief, bright month was over, Philip had gone back to his city home to take up the old life of aristocratic do-nothingness, and a wall had been built up between the two which no friendly meetings and no messages of any sort had beaten down.

Now the young man held out his hand to Mabel with all the old winning frankness that had charmed her in the bright days of the past.

"I can not tell you how rejoiced I am to meet with you once more," he said, gently.

Mabel's long lashes swept her cheeks as she murmured, softly, in reply:

"How does it happen that you are here, Mr. Jocelyn, in this lonely wood?"

"I came down from New York with a party of friends for a week's hunting. To-night I happened to stray away from my companions and became somewhat bewildered by the intricate windings of the forest. Some fortunate chance directed my footsteps to this spot, and I reached the house just in season to hear your scream for help, and that villain's last words."

He contemptuously touched Bill Cuppings' prostrate body with his foot as he spoke.

Mabel shuddered. "You arrived just in time to save my life," she said.

"Good God! That villain did not really intend to kill you?"

"I am sure that he did."

Philip Jocelyn opened wide his eyes in utter amazement. "I did not think he was quite so desperate. What had you done that he should seek your life?"

"Nothing."

"Why are you here, so far away from home?"

"I had set out for New York, and lost my way. I intended to take the night train at Milton."

He looked at her somewhat curiously. "Why were you going to New York?" he asked.

"Granny Wells is dead. I must seek a new home somewhere. Besides, I have another motive more powerful than all the rest, for wishing to go to the city."

"Will you tell me what it is?"

She briefly related her simple story—Mrs. Laudersdale's visit to the old hovel—Granny Wells' sudden death—her own mad journey, and the encounter with Bill Cuppings.

Philip Jocelyn's face grew very pale as he listened.

"This is a strange story," he said, when Mabel ceased to speak. "I hardly know what to make of it. Had any other person related it to me, I should instantly have set him down as a madman."

Mabel clasped her hands and gave him an appealing look. "I am not mad," she cried. "I have told you the truth from first to last."

"I believe that you have," he returned, gravely. "I would as soon doubt the word of an angel in heaven. It is very fortunate that we chanced to meet. I can take you directly to Woodlawn."

"Do you know the Laudersdales?"

"Yes."

He might have added that he was regarded as Marcia Denvil's lover by many, but did not choose to do so.

"I can see how it is," cried Mabel, lifting a penetrating glance to his face. "The Laudersdales are your friends. You are reluctant to think ill of them."

"That is true."

"And they will be sure to hate you if you befriend me."

"I care not for that," he returned, earnestly.

"If Mrs. Laudersdale is the wicked woman you think her, I have no desire for her friendship."

"She sought my life—I know she did," sobbed Mabel. "Do you not recognize that man lying at your feet?"

The young man leaned over Bill's motionless figure and scanned his features. "No," he replied, after a pause. "I do not remember ever to have seen him."

"He said he was Mrs. Laudersdale's servant."

"It is possible."

"And that she sent him here to take my life."

Philip answered nothing. He seemed buried in deep thought for some minutes. "You think Mrs. Laudersdale's husband knew nothing of the whole affair?" he said, at last.

"I am sure of it. He would befriend me, I think, if I could once gain an interview with him. It is only that infamous woman I have to fear."

At this juncture, Bill Cuppings' breast began to heave, and the muscles of his face to twitch convulsively.

"The poor wretch is reviving," cried Mabel, to whose quick eye not a movement was lost. "Let us leave this place at once. The owner of the house may return at any moment, and then we will have double odds to contend against."

"What do you mean?"

"He is a friend and ally of that man."

"Then the sooner we are off the better."

Bill's breathing was now perfectly audible. Philip raised him to a sitting posture, leaning his head against the wall. Then he hastily quitted the house, leading Mabel by the hand.

A few rods distant the horses Mabel and her would-be murderer had ridden to this spot were found busily browsing. They hurriedly mounted the backs of the faithful brutes, their movements somewhat accelerated by the sound of a heavy footstep entering the house, and the murmur of voices in that direction.

They had scarcely struck into the nearest discernible path when a loud shout rung on the air behind him, and two or three pistol-shots were fired in rapid succession.

The bullets whizzed harmlessly over the heads of the fugitives. "We are just in time," said

Philip, in a low, deep tone of voice, as they put spurs to their horses. "Mine host of the black house in the woods has evidently arrived."

They rode as rapidly as the darkness and the intricate windings of the forest would permit. There were no further signs of pursuit, however. Soon after midnight the trees became sparser and smaller, and finally the fugitives emerged into the open country.

After a short gallop across the fields, they reached a small farm-house.

Here they sought shelter for the night, which was readily accorded by the hospitable inmates.

In the morning they discovered that there was a small station only about four miles distant, from whence they could take the cars to New York.

Though jaded and worn, they decided to resume their journey at the earliest practicable moment. Consequently, long ere the sun had reached its meridian, they were on the way to the city.

About mid-afternoon they stood outside one of the smaller gates leading into the extensive grounds which were the glory of Woodlawn.

Here Mabel detained her companion. "I have nothing more to fear," she said ingenuously. "Let me say good-by to you here."

"And why good-by?" he asked, evincing no slight degree of surprise.

"I prefer to go on to the house alone."

He looked at her sharply. "I think I comprehend your object in leaving me here," he said, after a moment's thinking. "You wish to spare me all unpleasant consequences that are likely to accrue from having piloted you to this spot."

Mabel blushed and seemed not a little confused.

"I am no coward," he added, hastily. "Let us move on. I will see Mrs. Laudersdale myself."

"No, no, no. Indeed I would rather go alone. It is best that I should."

He looked puzzled, at a loss. "Something might happen to you," he urged. "If Mrs. Laudersdale is really the infamous woman you think her, your appearance at Woodlawn will drive her desperate. She will leave no means untried to accomplish your destruction."

"I do not fear her," said Mabel, bravely. "I shall ask to see Mr. Laudersdale, in the first place, and tell him my story."

"Do so."

"I am sure he will protect me, though I can not give a very satisfactory reason for my faith, other than his wife's overweening desire to keep us apart."

Philip Jocelyn seemed strangely grave and thoughtful. A dim foreboding of evil shot through heart and brain as he stood there with that helpless girl leaning so confidently on his arm.

"May God keep you and watch over you, Mabel," he said, in a thrilling whisper.

"I am sure that He will."

"You will remain at Woodlawn—I may call to-morrow to see you?"

"Yes," she answered, "you may come."

And then they parted.

Mabel passed in at the gate, and walked slowly along a shaded path that led up to the house.

Though she knew it not, a man's figure rose from the shrubbery only a few feet from where she and Philip had been standing, and noiselessly followed her.

She had accomplished less than half the distance to the house when, on turning a sudden bend in the path, she came face to face with a woman, who was advancing in the opposite direction.

That woman was Mrs. Laudersdale.

Mabel stood a moment as if riveted to the spot. The knowledge of the imminent peril that must, perforce, threaten her in that wicked Jezebel's presence, shot with lightning-like rapidity upon her mind.

She stood as if stricken dumb, her face blanched to the ashen hue of a corpse. All power of locomotion seemed to have left her trembling limbs.

While she stood thus, helpless and speechless, a mocking laugh sounded close to her ear, and the voice of Bill Cuppings—the man she had left lying in a half-senseless condition in the lone house in the woods—cried out in a loud, jeering tone:

"Caught, caught again, my lady!"

CHAPTER V.

TWO PRECIOUS SCOUNDRELS.

BEFORE following the further fortunes of our heroine, let us go back for a few minutes, to the lone house in the woods.

Philip Jocelyn and Mabel had scarcely left the building in their precipitate flight, and Bill Cuppings was slowly rising to his feet, his senses fully restored, when a new-comer made his appearance on the scene.

This person was a man of about fifty years of age. He was of herculean build, square-shouldered, deep-chested, with long and muscular arms. His physiognomy was any thing but prepossessing, the mouth being coarse and sensual, the chin protruding, the nose being incongruously sharp and thin, and ending in a very well-defined hook.

In short, he bore a slight but decided resemblance to Bill Cuppings himself.

Not needlessly to puzzle the reader, we will here inform him that the two men were brothers. They went by different names, however, and never acknowledged the relationship, save to each other.

The new-comer had selected for himself the cognomen of Miles Duff.

We use the word "selected" advisedly. He had no legal claim to the name, but was invariably spoken of as "Miles" by his confreres, very few of whom, if any, knew his true patronymic. Indeed, he had passed under so many *aliases* during his eventful career, that he scarcely knew it himself.

Need we say that Bill Cuppings was also an assumed name?

Miles, who was the master of the house of whom Bill had made mention to Mabel Trevor—had been beating the bushes for an hour or two, in search of game upon which to make his frugal supper. The instant he reached the clearing in which the house stood, he had caught the gleam of the candle-light in the kitchen window.

Angry at the thought that anybody should dare take possession of his premises in his absence, he had hurried to his house—unwittingly passing Philip and Mabel in the darkness—and had crossed the threshold with no gentle tread.

"Who in the devil's name are you?" he growled out, catching a glimpse of a man's figure leaning against the wall.

Striding a step or two nearer, he recognized his brother.

"You, Bill!" he exclaimed, recoiling. "What brought you here at this particular time?"

The rough passed his hands once or twice across his brow, as if to clear away some mist that still brooded darkly there. A fierce, tigerish gleam came into his evil-looking eyes.

"They're gone," he muttered, between his teeth, without paying the slightest attention to the new-comer's interrogations. "They're gone, confound them."

"Who's gone?" said Miles.

"The girl and the fellow who spirited her away. But it may not be too late to follow them. Miles," turning suddenly to his brother, "do you happen to have a pistol about you?"

"Of course," producing a six-shooter from his pocket, as he answered.

"Give it me."

Bill snatched the revolver, and darted eagerly to the door, where he stood listening intently for a moment. The dull thud of hoofs could plainly be heard, borne to his ears on the still night air.

"They've taken the horses," he cried, and a yell of rage and fury broke from his lips.

He discharged the revolver in the direction whence the sounds proceeded, but as the reader already knows, without result. The fugitives were already beyond his reach, since he would be compelled to pursue them on foot, if any pursuit was attempted.

Realizing the futility of any further efforts, he retraced his steps to the smoke-begrimed kitchen, where he found Miles tranquilly awaiting his coming.

"What's up?" said the latter, the instant he made his appearance.

"The very devil is to pay!"

"What do you mean?"

Bill briefly related what had happened. "My mistress sent me to kill that girl," he said, in conclusion, "and now she has escaped me. I was idiot enough to tell her who sent me on this tom-fool's errand, too."

Miles gave a low whistle. "You're in for it, sure enough," he said.

"I should think as much. Of course the girl will tell the whole story to the man who rescued her."

"Of course."

"Curse him! He gave me an ugly blow—knocked the senses clean out of me."

"Who was he?"

"Don't know his name. A young snob, who visits occasionally at Woodlawn."

"Do you think he knew you?"

"Can't say," growled Bill. "It isn't likely. I've only seen him at a distance before this."

"You saw him close enough to-night, in all conscience," laughed Miles.

"Yes, curse him!"

"What will you do?"

"Don't know." Bill dropped his head dejectedly into the palms of his hands, leaning an elbow on either knee. "I say, Miles," he cried out, after a moment's thinking, "can't you help a fellow?"

"Maybe. What can I do?"

"Go back to New York with me."

"Yes."

"And be ready for any emergency that may arise."

"I'll think about it."

Bill looked at him curiously. "Why are you staying here?" he asked.

"The fact is," returned Miles, coolly, "the city became too hot to hold me, some weeks since. This lonely spot has long been my retreat at such times, you know."

"Yes, I am well aware of that fact."

The villain had, indeed, spoken truly. This house in the woods was a retreat to which he had for years been in the habit of hastening—for the benefit of his health, as he generally expressed it—whenever the beaks became more than usually solicitous to cultivate his acquaintance.

"But I think I may now venture to return to the city. Of course I will go, if I can be of the slightest use to my loving brother."

"Bah! Mrs. Laudersdale will pay you well, if that is what you mean."

"Pay me well for what?"

"Any service you may be so fortunate as to render."

"Of course," tipping Bill a sly wink. "This Mrs. Laudersdale has long been the goose who lays your golden eggs, I understand. I can't do better than to cultivate her acquaintance."

"I am sure of that," dryly.

"It's a wonder I never chanced to meet her, since you have been in her good graces so long."

"I don't know. You never come to Woodlawn."

"Humph!" sneered Miles, "you never wished me to come—until you had use for me!"

Bill folded his arms complacently, and looked at his brother.

"I had a character to sustain," he said. "You are too well known in New York, and it would have ruined me if our relationship was suspected."

"We are just as nearly related to-night as we were last week, or last year."

"Humph! Circumstances alter cases. This is an emergency, and I must not be too particular. It is necessary that I reach Woodlawn in advance of this girl, and with the help of Mrs. Laudersdale, concoct some scheme for disposing of her before she has time to work mischief."

"And you think I can assist you?"

"Yes. There is not time to look elsewhere for the help we are likely to need."

A brutal sneer curled Miles' lip.

"Very good," he muttered. "But before I consent to any such arrangement as this you propose, I'd like to know something more of Mrs. Laudersdale herself."

"What do you wish to know?"

"Who and what she is."

"Shall I begin as far back in her history as I know any thing of it myself?"

"Yes."

"Then you must be content with one or two details. Her private history is a secret from the world, and she wishes it to remain such."

"I thought so."

"It was seventeen years ago that I first fell in with her. She was a blooming widow at the time—or so represented herself—shrewd, clear-headed, and unprincipled. She had been on the stage, playing a minor part in the lower grade of theaters."

"Go on."

"At Saratoga, where she went to spend some of her superfluous cash one summer, she met Mr. Laudersdale, who was at the time an apparently inconsolable widower. Well, this wily woman played her cards to perfection and soon won him from the contemplation of his grief."

"Don't come the sentimental, Bill."

"How can I help it? To cut short my story, this far-sighted widow married Mr. Laudersdale and thus gained a luxurious home for herself and her daughter, Marcia."

"Marcia!"

Miles had been indolently reclining in one of the rush-bottomed chairs with which the kitchen

was furnished. But at the mention of that name, he sprang suddenly to his feet.

"Had Mrs. Laudersdale a daughter before she married her present husband?" he asked, in a low, breathless tone of voice.

"Yes, as I have said, a daughter Marcia."

"And what was the mother's name?"

"In the days of her widowhood—Martha Denvil."

An irrepressible cry escaped the lips of Miles. His face became terribly convulsed with passion. Surprise, hate, rage, bewilderment, all seemed to be struggling for the mastery in his countenance. His fingers twitched, his lips trembled.

Bill looked at him sharply. "What's the matter?" he asked. "What ails you, man?"

"Nothing."

Miles dropped into his chair again, and sat with his face hidden for many minutes. "Strange, strange," his companion heard him mutter, huskily, after a long and sullen silence. "Strange that I should hear of her after all these years, and in this way."

At last he raised his head. He had succeeded in banishing from his countenance every trace of the emotion that had so recently convulsed it, save a slight pallor that lingered about the lips.

"This Marcia Denvil of whom you spoke just now," he began, quite composedly, "does she, too, live at Woodlawn with her mother?"

"She does."

"And is treated like an own daughter by Mr. Laudersdale?"

"Yes."

The eyes of the two men met. Miles' expressed nothing save a sullen, dogged sort of resolution. Those of Bill Cuppings twinkled with cunning and ill-concealed curiosity.

"You are not doing the fair thing by me, Miles," he said, suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"You are keeping a secret from your own brother."

"Perhaps."

"I don't like it," muttered Bill. "I was frank and free enough with you."

Miles spread out the five fingers of his right hand, and for the next few minutes had all the appearance of being engaged in a profound study of their different proportions.

"I don't wish to be bothered," he said, rousing himself at last. "If I have a secret—and mind that I do not own up to any thing of the sort—you shall know it in good time. I can promise nothing further."

"I dislike being trusted by halves," grumbled Bill, feeling any thing but satisfied.

Miles rose up from his chair to end the conversation.

"My mind is made up," he said, gruffly. "I'm going to the city to join in your plans, heart and soul. But we must have a bite of supper before we set out."

"Is there any train to-night?"

"Yes, the three o'clock express. We can reach the station in time."

"Mabel Trevor will also take the cars for the city, unless I am very much mistaken. Is there no chance of intercepting her on the way?"

"Not the slightest, since we can not tell what route she will take. The most we can do is to look for her at the station."

This the two worthy confederates did, when they reached Milton in the cold and darkness of the morning. But no glimpse of the hapless girl rewarded this careful quest.

As the reader is already aware, she and Philip Jocelyn did not set out for the city until some hours later.

On arriving in New York, Bill proceeded at once to Woodlawn, that he might acquaint Mrs. Laudersdale with the imminent danger that menaced her.

Miles lingered in the neighborhood to learn precisely when his services were likely to be needed. Early in the afternoon, Bill sought him out in the retreat he had selected—a low dram-shop.

"The girl has not been heard from as yet," he said. "But my mistress is of opinion that she will make her appearance before the day is ended. You and I are to keep a close watch on the various entrances to the grounds, prepared to act as the emergencies of the case may seem to warrant."

Miles nodded a ready acquiescence.

"I shall soon come face to face with my Lady Laudersdale," he muttered, on the way to Woodlawn. "I'd run any risk for the privilege of confronting her once more."

And a strange smile curled his lips.

CHAPTER VI.
A CAPTURED DOVE.

WE have now followed the course of events up to the moment when Mabel Trevor so unexpectedly encountered Mrs. Laudersdale, her most deadly and dangerous enemy, in the grounds at Woodlawn, while attempting to approach the house.

As we related in a former chapter, while she stood as if frightened out of her wits by the sudden meeting, the well-known voice of Bill Cuppings had exclaimed, close to her ear:

"Caught, caught again, my lady!"

Even as he spoke, the villain's brawny hand descended on her shoulder, where it fastened itself in a vise-like grip.

Mabel's brain reeled, and she grew giddy with terror. She tried to speak, to call out, but only a faint cry escaped her trembling lips.

"None of your screeching," growled the brute, who held her fast. "It will do you no sort of good."

"Stop her mouth, Bill," said Mrs. Laudersdale, angrily. "Somebody might hear her if she were to scream for help."

"All right," and he dropped his disengaged hand over the mouth of the helpless girl.

"Thought to get ahead of us, did you?" he jeered, putting his face close to her white and quivering one. "Bah! You are in our power again. And no handsome young fellow is likely to come to your rescue this time."

True, true! Oh, why had she not suffered Philip to go with her to the house, as he wished? But it was now too late for regrets.

A film came before Mabel's eyes as she realized this fact. The cold, cruel face of the man and woman bending over her seemed to recede of a sudden, and grow dim and ill-defined. They soon vanished altogether, and her hands fell listlessly to her side.

She had fainted.

"Good," chuckled Bill. "That's what I call clever of her. She has saved me a world of trouble."

"Yes, yes."

"Now, what's to be done with her?"

Before Mrs. Laudersdale could frame any reply to this question, a step sounded in the gravel-walk, and a man stood beside them as suddenly as if he had risen from the ground.

Mrs. Laudersdale gave him a frightened glance, then looked again. Her eyes riveted themselves on his face, and slowly dilated as if they were staring at some ghastly and awful horror. Her own face blanched to the ashen hue of a corpse, and the perspiration broke out in beads upon her brow.

Slowly her trembling lips unclosed.

"Oh, just Heaven!" she moaned.

Then, by a superhuman effort of the will, she conquered the deadly faintness that was fast stealing away her senses, and stretching out both her quivering hands to the new-comer, she gasped:

"For God's sake, who are you?"

"Miles Duff, at your service, was the ready reply.

It was, indeed, the clever scoundrel whom we have introduced to the reader under that alias.

Mrs. Laudersdale advanced nearer and nearer to the man, as if enticed onward by some fatal fascination she was wholly powerless to resist.

"It's a lie!" she shrieked. "You are not Miles Duff! You are—"

"Hush!"

The villain put up his hand warningly, at the same time glancing apprehensively toward Bill.

"It is at your own peril that you speak that name," he muttered. "You'd better be cautious."

Mrs. Laudersdale seemed surprised at his words and manner. She had evidently looked for something different on his part. Dropping into a garden seat that stood near, she slowly wiped the cold damps of fear from her brow.

"Take care," Miles hissed, again, close to her ear.

She looked at him, trembling from head to foot.

"I thought you were dead," she muttered.

"You mean that you hoped I was?"

"You cannot blame me if I did."

"No," he sneered. "You've played a very clever game, Martha."

"Not a word of that now."

At this moment, it was she who looked apprehensive. Strengthening every nerve to meet the critical situation in which she found herself, she had succeeded in regaining her composure.

"Betray nothing," she whispered, "until we have had a long talk together. I think we'll come to an understanding."

"Perhaps," said Miles, significantly.

BILL had been covertly watching the two for some minutes. "You and Mrs. Laudersdale are old friends," he muttered, sullenly, turning to his brother. "Why didn't you tell me all about it last night?"

"There wasn't much to tell," answered Miles.

"I know better."

"We are losing time," Mrs. Laudersdale now broke in, pointing to the inanimate form of poor Mabel, which was still reclining in Bill's arms. "This path is much frequented, and we are liable to be interrupted at any moment. Something must be done with that girl before she recovers her senses."

"Of course," said Miles.

Mrs. Laudersdale looked at him sharply. "How does it happen that you are here at this opportune moment?" she asked.

It was Bill Cuppings who answered.

"Don't you remember? I told you that I had engaged somebody to help me in looking after the girl."

"And he is the man? Ah, yes. I understand it all now."

She drew a deep breath of relief.

"What will we do with the girl? Quick; let us come to some decision."

"She can't well be taken from the grounds until after nightfall," said Miles.

"True."

Mrs. Laudersdale sat silent and thoughtful for a minute or two. Then she started suddenly to her feet.

"I have it!" she exclaimed. "You can take her to the boat-house, for the present. It is quite secluded. Nobody will be going nigh the place to-day."

"Is it secure?"

"Perfectly so. You have the key, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Then the sooner you are off the better."

The two men nodded assent to this remark. Mabel was raised between them, and they took a short cut across the grounds, walking as rapidly as possible, Bill leading the way.

Mrs. Laudersdale remained on the spot where the meeting had taken place.

The two villains, with their precious burden, penetrated the shrubbery, passed through a small grove and a second fringe of bushes, finally emerging at a small stone building on the bank of the river.

This building was hidden by the thick shrubbery growing close to the wall on every side save that fronting on the water.

Even that was overrun with wild vines.

The only windows of which the place could boast were two or three gratings placed high up in the stone masonry.

"Tolerably secure, isn't it?" said Bill, smiling grimly, as he produced a key from one of his pockets.

"Humph! A regular little Bastille."

"So much the better." Bill thrust the key into the lock, then turned to look at his brother.

"Miles," he said, "what sort of an understanding is there between yourself and that woman?"

"To what woman do you refer?"

"You know perfectly well—Mrs. Laudersdale."

"Patience, patience. I promised to tell you in due time. You ought to be content with that promise."

"How do I know you ever intend to fulfill it?"

"You have my word."

"Pah!" Bill looked as if he thought Miles' word was not always to be trusted. He said nothing more, however, but proceeded to unlock the door of the boat-house.

The instant he had done this, Miles swung on his heel. "You can have no further use for me now," he muttered. "I'm off."

Bill, with a lowering brow, looked after his burly form until it was lost to sight among the bushes.

"The rogue thinks to gain time for a word with my Lady Laudersdale," he said, between his teeth. "Never mind. It will go hard if I don't circumvent those cunning devils yet, and surprise their secret."

He pushed open the nail-studded door of the boat-house, and carefully laid the girl's senseless figure on a pile of boughs in one corner of the interior.

Then he watched by her side until she began to exhibit signs of returning consciousness.

"She's a regular beauty," he muttered, watching the color as it slowly returned to her lips and cheeks. "It's a pity to kill her, after all. It's a pity, and shall not be done at mistress' nod, or that of anybody else."

Having come to this conclusion, he rose

hastily and passed out of the boat-house, taking care to lock the door securely behind him.

Then he wended his way swiftly back to the upper portion of the garden.

As he had expected, he found Miles there before him, in earnest converse with Mrs. Laudersdale, on the very spot where he had left the latter. He sought to approach them as noiselessly as possible, but only succeeded in overhearing a single sentence.

This was uttered by Mrs. Laudersdale herself, and only served to increase his curiosity a hundred-fold.

Her remark was this:

"I will make it for your interest to keep the secret."

The two separated hastily on seeing Bill. The artful woman turned to him with one of her most bewildering smiles when he joined them. "Every thing works well, so far," she said. "To-night the deed must be done. And you must take care that your victim does not escape you this time."

"Of course."

Bill did not think it best to say any thing of the sudden decision to which he had come. He understood too well the sort of woman with whom he had to deal.

"I think we understand each other perfectly well," she resumed, turning to go. "When this affair is over, you may come to me for reward."

Having given expression to her wishes in this manner, she walked hurriedly toward the house.

Left alone together, the two men preserved a thoughtful silence for some minutes. Each seemed to be weighing some matter of importance in his mind. Bill was the first to speak.

"Miles," he said, looking sharply at his brother, "I've changed my mind somewhat. That girl's life must be saved at all hazards."

Miles smiled and nodded.

"The very remark I was about to make to you."

The younger villain seemed just a little disconcerted. "Why should you take an interest in Mabel Trevor's welfare?" he asked.

"Bah! Don't I know what a cunning devil that woman is who has just left us? She must have some very powerful motive for wishing to take Mabel's life."

"Yes."

"Humph! Don't you take? The girl may be worth her weight in gold to us one of these days."

"That is true."

Bill smiled as he made this reply. Mrs. Laudersdale had confided pretty fully in him since his return from that fruitless expedition to Berlin. He could have given much more of Mabel's private history, and his mistress' reasons for hating and fearing the girl than Miles imagined.

"I'd better keep a close tongue in my head," he thought. "My worthy brother has no particular claim to my confidence so far as the girl is concerned. He will be more likely to help me if I am silent than if I speak out."

"Of course you will contrive to give Mrs. Laudersdale to understand that the girl is dead?" said Miles, after a moment's thinking.

"Of course."

"What's to be done with her?"

"Have you no idea?"

"None." He knitted his brow in perplexed thought. We will not undertake to say how many pictures of golden eggs danced before his mental vision in the next few minutes. At last he turned to his brother with a cry of satisfaction.

"I have it," he exclaimed, rubbing his hands briskly together. "I think I know of a person who would take charge of the girl and keep her out of sight for some time to come."

"To whom do you refer?"

"To a woman called Het Bender."

"Who is Het Bender?"

"Not so fast, not so fast, my respectable brother," chuckled Miles. "I will tell you more about her, perhaps, when I know that she will assist us."

"What is done must be done this very night."

"Yes, yes. I'll be off directly, see this woman, and communicate with you again early this evening."

"Very good."

The two men shook hands and parted.

CHAPTER VII.

MILES DUFF'S MISSION.

AGREEABLY to his promise, Miles hastened back to the city, and immediately made his way to the East river side, directing his footsteps to

the intersection of James and Water streets, known as Slaughter-House Point.

He finally paused before a dismal, ruinous-looking building in this disreputable quarter of the city.

It was a very old building, indeed. Many of the clapboards were loose, and rattled in every passing breeze. The building-front and heavy shutters were guiltless of paint; some of the long, narrow windows were boarded up; and against the frame-work of the iron-clamped door was nailed a placard intimating that the house was to let.

Notwithstanding this notice—intended to mislead the uninitiated—and a general air of desolation that brooded about the place, Miles Duff mounted the rickety wooden steps and gave four distinct knocks on the iron-clamped door.

Then he drew back a few paces, and, with both hands thrust nonchalantly into his trousers pockets, awaited the result of this summons.

At least five minutes elapsed before a movement of any sort was made; then the door softly opened, and a voice asked sharply:

"Who's there?"

"Miles," replied the ruffian. "Let me in, Peggy. I wish to see your mistress."

"Enter."

The door had been opened but the merest crack, in the first instance. That crack now widened sufficiently to afford our worthy friend ingress to a long, low passage, lighted just sufficiently to render its disgusting filthiness apparent.

In the passage stood a slatternly servant-girl, with a round face and great, blinking eyes that bore a ludicrous resemblance to those of an owl.

"Where's Het?" asked Miles, somewhat gruffly, the instant the street door was closed and locked behind him.

"Up-stairs, in de parlor," replied Peggy, talking through her nose.

"Any one with her?"

"Not a soul, Mr. Miles."

"Lead on, then. I have business of importance with her."

"Bizness?" echoed the girl, with a chuckle.

"That ab w'at she likes."

"Especially if there's money in it, eh?"

"Ob course."

Peggy now led the way along the passage and up a sort of winding staircase, the rotten boards of which creaked and trembled every time a foot was suffered to fall upon them.

At the back of the house was a large, square apartment, furnished with a few rickety chairs and a deal table. Its only occupant was a witch-like, ugly-looking old woman, who sat at the table, leisurely sipping a glass of gin and water.

Into this dreary chamber was Miles ushered by the slatternly servant-girl.

The old woman was Het Bender herself. She was a very unprepossessing creature, with filmy, bead-like eyes, a pock-marked face, and skin yellow as parchment. Two long, prong-like teeth garnished either side of her mouth, giving to it a singularly savage and brutal appearance.

Old Het, as she was familiarly termed by her acquaintances, kept an establishment of very questionable repute, in which young girls, ranging from the ages of six to twenty, were initiated into the mysteries of the Terpsichorean art.

In brief, she was a ballet-mistress, furnishing the dancing-girls for some of the second-rate theaters.

Not that she instructed them in the peculiar art herself! By no means. She had a competent instructor in the person of one Harry Belden, more generally known as "Handsome Hal," and of whom we shall have more to say anon. But she made the engagements with different managers, and pocketed the proceeds of such engagements. In fact, she was the head of the establishment.

This interesting personage brought down her empty glass with such force upon the table as to make it jingle merrily, when Miles entered the apartment.

"Ho, ho!" she chuckled, looking up at him, with an odd sort of leer in her filmy eyes. "So you are back again from your bit of ruralism, my worthy Miles?"

"Yes, I'm back again," he said, sullenly.

"Country air agrees with you, I reckon."

"Of course it does."

"Have a care, my fine friend," she cried, tauntingly, "or you'll stand a chance to try it again. Or maybe it'll be Sing Sing this time."

"Don't throw stones while you live in a glass house yourself, Old Het."

"No, Miles."

"I'm here to talk business, this time."

At the word "business" the old woman's eyes

brightened, and an expression, curiously blended of cunning and cupidity, came into them.

"Ho, ho! Draw up a chair, my worthy friend. Now what is it? Got an engagement for me?"

"No, it isn't that."

"What then?"

"I can tell you best by asking a question. Would you like to add to the number of your pupils?"

Old Het's under lip began to fall. She feared that the "business" upon which Miles wished to see her might not amount to much after all.

"That depends," she said, slowly. "Unless extra inducements are offered, I've got idle mouths enough to feed, already."

"Extra inducements will be offered."

"Humph! How old is the girl?"

"Seventeen or eighteen, I judge."

Old Het gave a start of surprise. "Too old—entirely too old," she muttered.

"Not if you are well paid for taking her?"

"Bah! Speak to the p'int, Miles Duff. Tell me jest what you want of me."

The villain smiled.

"You are to take charge of this girl—see that she does not pass the threshold of this house under any pretext whatever—and suffer Handsome Hal to teach her as much or as little of his art as you please."

Old Het nodded and looked wise.

"I see, I see," she growled, still continuing to bob her grizzled head. "It's some forlorn critter that's to be kept out of the way for a while. But I'm the woman for your money, if you give me enough of it."

"I thought so."

"Who is the girl?" she asked, after a short silence.

"Her name is Mabel Trevor."

"Pretty?"

"A regular beauty."

"Ho, ho!" chuckled the crone. "So much the better; so much the better."

Miles dropped one hand heavily on her arm.

"Bear this in mind, God-forsaken sinner," he said, in a low, deep tone of voice, "that no harm is to happen to the girl—*harm of any sort!*"

The old woman wriggled uneasily in her chair.

"Yes," she muttered, though in accents of disappointment.

"You are merely to detain the girl here until she is wanted elsewhere. She must receive no visitors, hold no communication whatever with the outside world."

"I understand."

"And can keep her thus secluded?"

"Yes."

"Your neighbors will not be likely to interfere, should she find means of appealing to them for assistance to escape?"

Old Het laughed aloud at the question.

"You ought to know my neighbors better than to fear that, Miles. Who are they? Harbor thieves, for the most part, and still more dangerous characters. The girl will be safe enough."

"She must be brought here this very night."

"And the pay?"

"You shall receive ten dollars a week as long as she remains under your roof."

"Good. I agree to the terms."

"You will find that Miss Trevor has got some very wild notions in her head. She may even make strange accusations against one or two persons of high standing in the community. But you are to pay no attention whatever to her remarks."

"Of course not," said the hag, significantly.

"Because they will have no foundation in truth," added Miles.

"Humph! I don't know that."

Miles burst into an insulting laugh.

"Whether you believe me or not," he said,

"it will not be well for you to act upon any hints that the girl may throw out, or seek to trace back her history by means of them."

The hag trembled under the threatening look he gave her. "I've no wish to meddle with any thing of the sort," she hastened to reply. "You needn't feel any alarm on that score."

At this instant the room-door was flung open, and a young man, tall, handsome, debonaire, but very *blase*-looking, unceremoniously entered the apartment.

A hideous smile wrinkled the hag's face at his appearance. She immediately rose from her chair, and stepped forward to greet him, throwing one skinny arm over his shoulders with a display of fondness that was absolutely disgusting.

"Is it you, my Apolle?" she whined.

The young man made a grimace. "Yes, it is I, most charming Het," he said, in an ironically caressing tone of voice. "Does my presence bring joy to your heart?"

"Of course it does," simpered the old fool. He looked at Miles, with a nod and a sly wink. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever," he quoted.

"You know you are handsome, Hal."

"And that you appreciate my good looks, eh, old Het?" said Harry Belden, for the new-comer was, indeed, Het Bender's teacher of dancing.

"Of course I appreciate them," she answered, regarding him with looks of undisguised admiration.

"That's pleasant; I'll be blest if it isn't."

"You are to have a new pupil," said Het, after a pause.

"Eh?"

"A young lady, beautiful as an houri. What do you think of that, my Apolle?"

"I'm delighted, of course. When is she coming?"

"To-night."

"So much the better," laughed the *roue*.

Miles now rose to his feet. "I must go," he said. "But, Het, perhaps you'd better repeat the warning I gave you to Handsome Hal. It might be of use to him!"

And having given utterance to this very significant speech, the ruffian took his departure.

The object of his mission was accomplished. He hurriedly retraced his steps to report to Bill Cuppings.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAFFLED AND PERPLEXED.

It was evening of the same day.

Just as the shadows of twilight were beginning to fall in purple dimness over the landscape, Mrs. Laudersdale sat alone by the open window of her dressing-room.

She was lost in her own gloomy and evil thoughts.

"It will soon be over," she muttered, presently. "Bill failed me once, but I have perfect confidence in him; he'll not fail me a second time. A few hours more, and that girl, who stands in my way, will have ceased to live."

An expression of malignant triumph settled upon her dark, stern face as she gave utterance to these thoughts welling in her guilty soul.

"The girl knows too much," she said, after a brief silence. "I can never breathe freely until she is put beyond the reach of harming me. Ah! how bitterly I hate her!"

She would have added more, but just at this instant a hasty step made itself audible on the gravel-walk below.

Glancing from the window, Mrs. Laudersdale saw that it was Philip Jocelyn who was approaching the house.

A single word will explain his appearance at this time. On parting with Mabel Trevor at the gate in the early hours of the afternoon, it will be remembered, the young man had made an appointment to come to Woodlawn the next day and learn the sort of reception Mabel had received at the hands of Mrs. Laudersdale and her husband.

But, immediately after having turned his back on our gentle heroine, he began to regret his precipitancy, and that he had not accompanied her to the house and seen her safely closeted with Mr. Laudersdale, despite her expostulations.

The more he reflected on the matter, the more nervous and uneasy he became. And finally, in spite of his better judgment, just at the close of the day he found himself retracing his steps to Woodlawn.

He could not rest until assured that Mabel was among friends who would protect her.

It was with feelings of unmitigated alarm that Mrs. Laudersdale witnessed, from her dining-room window, the young man's approach.

She knew very well the nature of his errand.

Bill Cuppings had, of course, told her every thing. Unable himself to give the name of the brave fellow who had dealt him that stunning blow in the house in the woods, and who, some hours later, had parted with Mabel at the gate leading into the Woodlawn grounds, he had given a most truthful and minute description of him.

In that description, to her utter surprise and consternation, the wicked woman had recognized Philip Jocelyn.

From that moment she hated Mabel Trevor with ten-fold intensity; for she had long intended that Marcia should become mistress of Philip's heart and the Jocelyn bonds and bank stock.

Even if nothing came of this unfortunate meeting of Philip with Mabel, it was likely to interfere with her pet scheme.

But, since Mabel had (without doubt) told her story to the young man, something worse was sure to come of it unless she (Mrs. Laudersdale) was prepared to meet the peril boldly.

This Jezebel rarely found herself at a loss.

In the present emergency, within twenty seconds after having seen and recognized Philip, she had risen to her feet and rung the bell sharply.

When a servant appeared, in answer to the summons, she said to her:

"If Mr. Jocelyn asks for me, say that I am on the east terrace."

Then, hastily throwing a lace mantle over her shoulders, she descended the stairs and passed out by one of the low windows opening from the breakfast-room.

Her face was a trifle paler than usual; otherwise, she was perfectly calm and composed.

"I must have the open air for this interview," she muttered; "I should stifle in those close parlors."

She had only taken a turn or two on the terrace, when she heard Philip's step approaching. Strengthening every nerve for the encounter, she turned to meet him.

"Delighted to see you, Mr. Jocelyn," she said, sweetly, holding out her hand to him.

"Will you join me in my promenade?"

"You must excuse me, Mrs. Laudersdale," he said, very gravely.

He could not quite forget the terrible things Mabel had said of this woman.

Her dark eyes scanned his face. "Perhaps you wish to see Marcia?" she ventured.

"No, I do not wish to see Miss Denvil."

"That pleasure is to be yours, whether you covet it or not," laughed Mrs. Laudersdale.

As she spoke, she directed his attention to a female figure that came gliding toward them from the garden. It was Marcia, with a straw hat on her head, and a light scarf thrown over her shoulders.

Philip looked a trifle disconcerted, but he greeted the young lady politely when she finally reached the spot where he and Mrs. Laudersdale were standing.

"Miss Trevor is not with you," he said, somewhat nervously. "Can you tell me where I will find her?"

"Miss Trevor?" echoed mother and daughter, in a breath.

The surprise manifested by the latter was genuine.

"Yes, that is the name," said Philip, quietly. "Miss Mabel Trevor."

"I know of no such person," returned Mrs. Laudersdale.

"The young lady you went to Berlin to visit."

"I never went to Berlin."

The woman's stare of amazement was well simulated; but Philip persisted, in spite of it.

"And who was enticed to a lonely house in the woods, by one of your confidential servants, and would have been murdered but for my interference?"

"You are beside yourself, Mr. Jocelyn!" she exclaimed. "What can you mean?"

"Precisely what I say. Miss Trevor is, or at least should be, in this house at the present moment."

"I tell you that I know of no such person."

The young man gasped for breath. A thousand fears beset him. The old, chill foreboding of ill shot still more vividly through heart and brain. He knew not what to say or do.

Then he turned abruptly to Marcia, his face pale, the damps of agony standing in beads on his forehead.

"You, at least, can have no object in deceiving me!" he cried. "I must find that girl. I fear some terrible calamity has befallen her. Tell me, I entreat, if you know where she is at the present moment."

"I swear to you," she answered, solemnly, "that I never heard the name mentioned until it passed your lips. I have seen no stranger to-day. I have not the slightest idea to whom you refer."

The amazement and perplexity depicted upon her haughtily-beautiful face told him but too clearly that she had spoken truly.

"Strange, strange," he muttered, his head drooping dejectedly on his breast.

By a power of will worthy of a better cause, Mrs. Laudersdale retained her unruffled composure.

"I wish you would state to us more clearly just who this Miss Trevor is," she murmured, laying her hand gently on Philip's arm. "We may then be able to come to some understanding."

He drew away from her with a shudder.

"I parted with Mabel at this gate, only five or six hours since," he said, almost wildly, for the uncertainty of the girl's fate had nearly driven him distracted. "You know very well who she is. She was coming directly to the house. I demand to know what you have done with her."

These last words were uttered in a fierce, impetuous tone of voice. They would have frightened a less desperate woman than Mrs. Laudersdale into confession.

But with her their only effect was to strengthen her resolution to fight out the terrible battle she had begun to the very end.

"I fear you have been made the victim of some singular imposture," she said, calmly. "I know nothing of this Mabel Trevor; neither has any strange woman crossed the threshold of my house."

"I will speak to Mr. Laudersdale himself!" cried Philip. "He, at least, will deal frankly with me."

"Do so, by all means. There he sits at the other end of the terrace. Since you will not believe me, come to him and question him to your heart's content."

The gathering darkness concealed the smile of malicious triumph that curled her thin lips as she gave utterance to these words.

The three moved quickly to the spot where Mr. Laudersdale was sitting, leisurely enjoying his cigar and a quiet contemplation of the beauty of the evening.

Mrs. Laudersdale was secretly determined that no lengthy explanation should take place; and, to prevent this, she herself took the initiative.

"Jasper," she said, sweetly, "I have an important question to ask."

"What is it, my dear?" said Mr. Laudersdale, hastily throwing aside his cigar.

"For Mr. Jocelyn's enlightenment, I wish you to tell me if you know, or ever heard, of a young lady named Mabel Trevor."

"I know of no such person," was the ready answer. "The name is strange to me."

His calm, even tone of voice would admit of not the slightest doubt of his sincerity.

Before Philip could put in a single word on his own side, Mrs. Laudersdale hurried him away.

"Are you satisfied?" she whispered.

"Yes," he replied, dejectedly.

He was at his wits' end. He knew not what to think or say. Mabel had assured him with her own lips that Mr. Laudersdale would be her friend, and now he had denied all knowledge of her!

What could be the meaning of this apparent contradiction?

"You see I was correct in my judgment," Mrs. Laudersdale said, quietly. "You have been the victim of an impostor. I do assure you that the misguided creature's story, whatever may have been its nature, is false from beginning to end."

He was too deeply bewildered, by far, to deny the truth of this assertion. He walked up and down the terrace in silence, for some minutes, trying to collect his thoughts.

Suddenly a shrill cry, evidently coming from a distance, broke upon the air. "Help, help!"

He stood still in his tracks, and listened eagerly. The cry was repeated, though in fainter and half-smothered accents.

"It is Mabel's voice," he shouted, hoarsely. "I believe the poor angel is being murdered."

He leaped over the terrace wall, and darted like mad down one of the nearest of the garden paths.

A smothered curse fell from Mrs. Laudersdale's white lips. She glided up to the spot where Marcia was standing, the picture of astonishment.

"Follow him—follow Philip Jocelyn!" she said between her set teeth, grasping firmly hold of Marcia's arm. "We are both lost if you do not overtake him before it is too late! Bring him back at every hazard—bring him back!"

Marcia looked steadfastly at her mother.

"What cause is there for alarm?" she quickly asked.

"He told the truth in regard to that girl! And it was she who screamed just now. Quick, quick! For God's sake bring him back before he finds her!"

And, almost fainting with emotion, Mrs. Laudersdale dropped into a garden-chair, gasping for breath, but still continuing to gesticulate violently for her daughter to follow the path down which Philip Jocelyn had disappeared.

Marcia realized that the case must be one of extreme urgency, and, after a momentary hesi-

tation, she hurried away, filled with the somewhat mad hope of making herself of service.

Philip, meanwhile, having only those two faint cries to guide his footsteps, after following the path he had chosen, for half a dozen rods, perhaps, struck across the lawn, and made for a gate near the lower end.

If anybody was leaving the grounds, they would be likely to leave them at this point.

The event proved the wisdom of this movement on his part. It was now quite dark, but he had scarcely reached the gate when his quick ear caught the impatient stamping of horses in the lane beyond.

Presently through the dusk, he distinguished the outline of a close carriage only a few yards distant.

Even as he looked the light of a dark lantern flashed for a moment upon the scene.

By the aid of its friendly gleam he distinctly saw Bill Cuppings seated within the carriage, holding the apparently senseless body of a woman in his arms.

That woman must be Mabel Trevor.

In spite of Mrs. Laudersdale's insinuations, in his heart of hearts he still believed in the girl's truth. And, with a cry of rage and despair, he now darted forward to her rescue.

Too late! A whip was flourished in the air, a shout of derision flung back at him, and the carriage spun swiftly down the darkening lane.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ABDUCTION.

LET us now turn back to follow the fortunes of our heroine from the moment when she was locked in the old boat-house by Bill Cuppings.

The villain had scarcely disappeared when Mabel rose up from the pile of boughs where he had laid her, her senses fully restored.

A single glance at her surroundings was sufficient to tell the hapless girl that she was a prisoner, and in the power of her enemies.

Nevertheless, she groped her way to the door, and sought to open it. It resisted all her efforts, as she had expected it would.

The small, lattice-work windows through which a sort of semi-twilight penetrated to the boat-house, were too high up and too narrow to be available.

She knelt down upon the pile of boughs, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Why should Mrs. Laudersdale seek so persistently to rob me of liberty or life?" she murmured. "That guilty woman's secret must be a most monstrous one, since it drives her to such desperate measures. She both dislikes and fears me."

Trembling in every limb, she scarcely dared to move. It was impossible to tell how soon Bill Cuppings would return, or some villain quite as unprincipled make his appearance, to put an end to her misery with her life.

The afternoon slowly waned, however, and she was still left undisturbed in her dreary prison.

It had grown pitch-dark in the boat-house, when, at last, a footstep was heard to approach. A key clicked in the lock, and the next instant the light of a lantern flashed upon the rude couch where Mabel was lying.

She started up, rubbing her eyes smartly, for they were nearly blinded by the sudden illumination. What she saw was a heavy-limbed fellow, with a most repulsive cast of countenance, standing in the low doorway.

It is needless to say that this man was Miles Duff.

"Get up," he said, in a gruff, but not unkind voice, "get up and come with me."

"Who are you?" Mabel asked, faintly.

"A friend."

She trembled, and shrunk away from him. She did not remember ever to have seen the man. How was she to tell whether it would be safe to trust him or not?

"Come," he cried impatiently, "I can't wait."

"You are really going to take me to some place of safety?" Mabel ventured.

"Of course. Don't keep me standing here. You'll be much better with me than in this dreary hole."

This was true, perhaps. Mabel ceased to hesitate, but tremblingly drew near the door. Miles at once caught hold of her hand.

"There," he exclaimed, "that's jolly; cling fast to me, miss, and I'll have you among friends in a jiffy."

Mabel yielded herself to his guidance without a word of remonstrance.

As they penetrated the shrubbery, she looked around with no small degree of curiosity. Overhead, the stars were just twinkling into view, the gray of twilight scarcely having faded from the sky.

To the left she heard the wash and low murmurous flow of the river. On every other side lay what seemed to be the shadowy recesses of a large garden.

She rightly guessed that she had not been taken from the Woodlawn grounds at all on losing consciousness so utterly at the sudden appearance of Bill Cuppings and Mrs. Laudersdale.

Her companion strode onward in silence, still keeping fast hold of her hand, so that she was compelled to keep pace with him.

At last they reached a small gate, through which they passed. They had scarcely done so, however, when Mabel distinguished, through the dusk, a close carriage waiting at a little distance.

At the same instant the dark figure of a man rose up from beside the hedge.

"You've brought along the bird, I see," said the well known voice of Bill Cuppings.

"Yes," returned Miles, briefly.

"I'm glad she concluded to come peaceably."

Mabel's heart sunk, as she listened to these words. A cold chill of fear crept among the roots of her hair, and her old feelings of dread were roused into increased activity.

"Betrayed," she moaned.

"Not so," said Miles, "we are really your friends—Bill and I—and mean you no harm."

She did not believe him, and tried to break clear of his hold.

"Stop that!" he cried, furiously. "Here, Bill," to his comrade, "lend a helping hand. The girl is like a wild fawn. Help me to lift her into a carriage."

Bill approached. Mabel shrunk from him in terror and disgust.

"Help! help!" she shrieked at the top of her voice.

"Furies!" muttered Bill. "You'd better not try that again."

But the poor girl was nearly frantic, and screamed a second time in spite of his threat. The ruffian was compelled to place his hand over her mouth to stifle her cries.

It was these cries, it will be remembered, that attracted Philip Jocelyn's attention.

"The fool has lost her senses," growled Bill. "What are we to do with her—knock her on the head, as my mistress wishes?"

"By no means," answered Miles. "Leave me to manage her."

He coolly set down the dark lantern he carried, whipped a small vial from his pocket, and poured a small portion of its contents on his handkerchief, which he pressed hard against Mabel's nostrils.

The effect was magical. After a slight struggle or two, and a long, gasping breath, her head fell back, and she was perfectly senseless.

"I always come prepared for an emergency like this," chuckled Miles. "Now do you lift her into the carriage, and we'll be off."

"You're a jewel, Miles," said Bill.

"I'm glad you appreciate me. You might have done worse than to seek my help in this business, eh, my respectable brother?"

"A thousand times."

"That is true. Now let's be off."

He picked up the lantern and mounted the box of the carriage. After having secured the lines, he once more opened the slide of the lantern and threw a momentary gleam of light into the carriage, where Bill had now established himself, holding Mabel's senseless form clasped in his arms.

"All right?" he asked, in a whisper.

"All right," responded his worthy confederate, in the same low tone of voice.

At this instant the gate through which Miles and Mabel had passed a few minutes previously was heard to clang sharply, and a loud cry of anger and despair sounded in that direction.

Miles heard the cry, though he failed to recognize the voice as belonging to Philip Jocelyn. But it certainly boded no good to himself; so he cracked his whip, and tore like mad down the darkening lane.

He took a roundabout course—now approaching the river, now receding from it. This was done in order to mislead pursuit, for he finally approached close to the water's edge at a point quite remote from Woodlawn, and pulled up the horses.

So well had this clever villain laid his plans since that hurried visit to Slaughter House Point during the afternoon, that a boat awaited him here, and a man to look after the horses.

"Quick!" he cried, leaping from the box, and pulling open the carriage door. "We must be safely stowed away in a cab on the other side before the girl recovers from the effects of the narcotic."

Bill stepped out with his precious burden, and the two worthy confederates were soon pulling over the dark surface of the water.

A cab was awaiting them at the point where they landed. Mabel was thrust into this, Bill and Miles followed her, and the three were driven rapidly in the direction of Slaughter House Point.

By the time the poor girl had become fully conscious of what was transpiring about her, she had been hustled into the ruinous old building of which we made mention in a previous chapter, and both Het Bender and Handsome Hal were bending over her and regarding her with ill-concealed curiosity.

She shrank shudderingly away from old Het's evil-looking face, and, in piteous entreaty, held out both her hands to Handsome Hal.

"Oh, save me! save me!" she moaned.

Het burst into a loud, derisive laugh.

"The gal takes to you nat'ral like, me beauty," she said, giving Hal a poke in the ribs.

"Be quiet, can't you?" he growled. "Don't you see the poor creature is frightened?"

"Poor creature!" mimicked the hag. "That's good, comin' from you, me Apollo. Poor creature, indeed!"

"Hang it, stop your infernal chatter!"

Old Het's face suddenly darkened. A gleam of jealous rage came into her beady eyes.

"Have a care!" she hissed in Handsome Hal's ear. "I'll not brook a rival in the gal, remember that!"

"Pshaw," he said, in an appeasing tone of voice; "don't borrow trouble of that sort, my charmer. Can't I pity the poor girl without you getting into a jealous fury?"

"Surely, surely."

She endeavored to speak with her accustomed good humor. And yet she was already beginning to repent of her bargain to detain Mabel in her establishment until the persons interested in the girl's welfare saw fit to remove her.

"It is said that 'no fool is like an old fool.' Singular as it may appear, old Het was quite as fond of Handsome Hal as she pretended to be, and already felt furiously jealous of the newcomer.

Mabel, meanwhile crouching low in the corner where she had been set down by Bill, glanced from one to another of those around her, scarcely knowing whether she were awake or dreaming.

Her state of mind was natural enough under the circumstances. Of the row across the river and the ride from the west of the city to the old building at Slaughter House Point, she knew nothing. She had awakened as from a sound slumber, to find herself under old Het's roof and among the strange surroundings there to be met with.

Her eyes dilated more and more widely as she listened to the conversation carried on by Het and Handsome Hal. But she still continued to glance at the latter, in wild appeal.

"Hear me," she urged. "For the love of heaven, save me. Your face looks friendly. There is no one else to whom I dare appeal. Oh, save me from the violence of those cruel men."

She pointed toward Miles and Bill, who stood in the background, coolly but covertly observant of all that transpired in the apartment.

Hal shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish I could save you. I do, indeed, my lady," he said. "But I don't see how it's to be done. I have no more influence in this house than you have. Don't trust to me."

"Well put, my Apollo," cried Het, striking the young man on the back. "You are a non-entity here, now ain't you? You don't have a particle of influence with your lovin' old Het, eh?"

Then, without waiting for a reply, she stepped up to Mabel and pulled the girl roughly to her feet.

"Stand up, you weepin' cherub," she said, "and come with me. You are to be under my care for the present, and precious good care you'll get, too. So, come along. I'm goin' to show your ladyship to your dressin'-room."

And laughing heartily, she attempted to push Mabel before her, toward the door.

"Good heavens!" murmured the poor girl, with white lips. "Will nobody help me? Must I, indeed, go with this wicked woman?"

Handsome Hal, who felt as much compassion for the helpless captive as he was capable of experiencing, leaned over her of a sudden, and whispered in her ear:

"You'd better go quietly with old Het, miss. There's really no help for it. But I'm sorry for you, hang me if I'm not."

The hag pushed them viciously apart, "What are you whisperin' about there?" she said, shaking Mabel roughly by the arm. "Come along, you hussy. I can't stand your whisperin', nohow! You've made trouble and rumpus enough for one night. So come along, I say."

And, alternately pushing and dragging, she succeeded in getting Mabel out of the room.

The instant the door closed behind her, Bill Cuppings stepped up to Handsome Hal and dropped one huge hand on his shoulder.

"Look o' here, my hearty," he said, in a low, dogged tone of voice. "I've had my eye on you ever since I entered this room. That girl in yonder is pretty and peart, and you know it. But she's my prize, and I'll have no meddling. Do you understand that?"

"Of course," said Hal, insolently, though he looked somewhat disconcerted.

"I hope you'll take warning then. I've spoken twice, and I don't intend to speak again."

He turned as he spoke, drew Miles' arm into his own, and the two men quitted the room and the house.

CHAPTER X.

NEW QUARTERS.

MABEL TREVOR was conducted to an apartment at the back of the house by Old Het.

A sputtering tallow candle stood on a small table near the door, and threw a faint, uncertain light around, but wholly failed to penetrate the more remote recesses of the room.

The light was amply sufficient, however, to reveal to Mabel the fact that she was in a long dormitory where several beds were ranged on either side against the walls.

Some of the beds were already occupied, for the sound of heavy breathing—proceeding from different quarters—came distinctly to the ears of the startled girl.

Old Het led the way to one corner, where stood a couch by itself.

"Here is your dressin'-room and parlor, all in one, my lady," she said, with a sort of grim humor. "Make the most of 'em, for you'll get no better while under this roof."

Then, without vouchsafing another word, she took up the candle and hastily quitted the apartment.

Mabel stood in the darkness, scarcely daring to breathe. Her pulses throbbed madly, and an icy chill of fear struck upon her heart. What sort of creatures had she for companions? It was impossible to tell in the profound gloom that now reigned everywhere.

She felt her strength giving way under the accumulated horrors of her situation. Her limbs trembled under her, and she was compelled to throw herself on the couch, or fall to the floor as she stood.

Hiding her face in the pillow, she lay very quiet, save the convulsive shiverings that every now and then shook her frame.

Two or three hours must have elapsed when the room door was again opened, and several dark forms filed past her in the darkness.

Nobody approached her own couch, however. She heard the subdued chatter of girlish voices, as they made their preparations to retire; and presently all was still, save the heavy sighs of the sleepers.

Worn out with fear and wonder and the excitement of her present situation, Mabel, too, after a futile struggle to keep her eyes open, sunk into a heavy sleep.

When she awoke, morning had dawned, and a feeble light was seeking to penetrate to the interior of the room through the tattered shades that covered the three side windows of the dormitory.

At least a dozen girls were fluttering about in the room, engaged in making a hasty toilet. They were of various ages, but nearly all of them looked worn, weary and hollow-eyed.

Mabel raised her head from the pillow and watched them with dilating eyes. She had never seen so motley an assemblage of her own sex, and was filled with wonder and amazement.

The girls returned her gaze with interest, but nobody ventured to speak to her or approach the couch where she was lying. As fast as their toilets were completed they left the dormitory.

At last only a single girl remained—a bright-eyed brunette, apparently of about sixteen years of age. She, too, was about to leave the apartment, but the appealing look which Mabel

drew nearer.

"I'm sure you wish to speak to me," she said, in a not unkind tone of voice.

Mabel eagerly grasped her hand.

"Where am I?" she whispered.

"Don't you know?"

"No."

The girl looked very much surprised. "Were you brought here against your wishes?" she asked.

"Why should I be here?"

"Many girls come of their own free will," was the dry response.

"What sort of place am I in? What are all those girls who slept here?"

"Ballet-dancers."

Mabel fixed an incredulous look upon her companion's face, but soon saw that she had spoken in all seriousness.

"How strange," she murmured. "Why should I be detained among them?"

"I don't know, unless you, too, are going to be a dancer—"

"No, no, no."

"Bless me if I can understand the case any better than you understand it yourself," was the half-insolent rejoinder. "Old Het only takes in girls who are to dance at one or the other of the theaters. Did you never dance?"

"Never."

"You'll find it ain't the easiest work in the world to learn, then. Handsome Hal wouldn't be hard on us girls if Old Het would let him alone. The old viper is soft on Hal, you must know, and won't permit any show of tenderness on his part."

Mabel remembered enough of the conversation of the previous evening to know who was meant by Het and Handsome Hal.

"What is your name?" she asked, abruptly.

"Julia."

"Julia: is there nothing more?"

The girl flushed to the very temples.

"That is enough," she answered. "It is better to dishonor one name than two."

Mabel understood her, and was silent for a few minutes. But she pressed Julia's hand with a warmth that brought tears into the bright, dark eyes. She could pity the poor sinner, for she realized something of the grinding poverty and destitution that must have dragged her so very low.

"Listen," said Mabel, presently. "I have been brought here by wicked men. I do not know their object in detaining me in such a place. But I feel that it will be ruin and moral death to remain. For the love of Heaven, help me to escape!"

Tears ran over her white cheeks. Convulsive sobs shook her frame. She seemed almost beside herself with grief.

"I pity you," said Julia. "I am sure you are innocent and good. You have spoken pleasantly to a poor waif like myself, and I will help you if I can."

At this instant footsteps were heard to approach the door.

"Hush!" whispered Julia, lifting a warning finger. "It is Old Het. She must not see us together."

She darted to the other end of the apartment just as the door opened, and the hag crossed the threshold.

Het glanced sharply around. She detected the traces of tears on Mabel's cheeks, and saw that Julia looked more than usually flushed. With her wonted shrewdness, she immediately guessed the cause.

"Leave the room," she said, angrily, addressing the latter.

Julia hurried out, for she dared not disobey the woman tyrant.

Old Het then stalked up to the couch on which Mabel was lying, her countenance still inflamed with anger.

"Ho, ho," she shrieked. "You've been tellin' some pitiful story or other to that hussy, have ye? Been tryin' to list her sympathies, eh?"

Mabel was too thoroughly frightened to answer.

"Dumb, be ye, or obstinate? It doesn't matter very much which of the two it may be. But I warn you of one thing—while you are here you'd better keep a close tongue in your head! Do you understand that?"

"Yes," said Mabel, faintly.

"I'm glad to hear it," and she showed her tusk-like teeth in a malicious grin. "If you think to ride rough in this 'ere shanty of mine, you're mighty mistaken. And I won't have no nonsense, as I said afore. If you go to talkin' soft to the gals, and raisin' a row generally, you'll repent on it: I declare you will."

Mabel raised herself to a sitting posture, a faint flash of anger coming into her violet eyes.

"You would not dare to harm me," she cried.

"Wouldn't, eh?" shrieked the belchame.

"Wouldn't? Try me if you dare! Yours wouldn't be the first white shoulders that have felt the whip. Ha, ha! I warn you to keep a close watch over yourself, my lady."

A slight moan fell from the poor girl's lips.

"I think we've come to somethin' like an understanding," grinned Old Het. "You are to make no mention whatever of who brought you here, or that you ain't here of your own accord. In short, you are to make as little conversation as is possible with the gals. On them terms I lets you alone—and I don't let you alone on any other!"

She shut her lips so sharply together and looked so fierce, and cruel, and determined as she said this, that Mabel had not the slightest idea of resisting her.

"I submit," she faltered.

"You'd better. Now get up and dress yourself. I'm goin' to take you in to breakfast."

Mabel slowly rose, when Het discovered that she had not removed her dress at all the night before.

"Hum. Is that the way you're goin' to manage?" she mumbled. "Well, do things your own way. Nobody cares. Now come along."

A few minutes later, Mabel found herself seated at a meagerly-furnished table in company with the same pale-faced girls who had occupied the dormitory with her.

CHAPTER XI.

GILBERT BELMONT.

WHEN, in obedience to her mother's command, Marcia Denvil had darted into the garden for the purpose of overtaking Philip Jocelyn, she ran on breathlessly in the darkness, trusting in chance to direct her footsteps.

She could see nothing, hear nothing that might, by any possibility, serve as a guide. She only knew the direction the young man had taken at the outset. He might have deviated from it more than once. If so, it was a hopeless task to seek to overtake him before he had made the discovery Mrs. Laudersdale feared he would make.

Marcia could only guess at the nature of that discovery. There was some young girl in the grounds, whom her mother, for certain reasons, did not wish Philip to see, or even to know positively of her presence there.

She, Marcia, was to prevent him from testing the matter to his own conviction.

"But, of the results involved, she had scarcely an idea.

Instead of taking a short cut across the garden, as Philip had done, she followed the turnings of the path she had selected.

After some intricate windings, it finally brought her to the gate leading into the lane.

As she approached the gate, she heard the rumble of a carriage that was being driven rapidly away, down the lane.

For an instant she stood as if transfixed with surprise.

"All this is very mysterious," she muttered. "I'm at a loss what to think or do. How do I know but that Philip himself is in that carriage?"

She had scarcely given utterance to these words when a heavy hand was dropped suddenly upon her shoulder.

"Well met," said a low, musical voice.

She turned with a start, and a half-suppressed cry of surprise. A man stood beside her, in the darkness.

"Is it you, Mr. Jocelyn?" she asked.

"No," was answered; "it is not Mr. Jocelyn."

The voice had a familiar sound. Her heart gave a great bound as she took cognizance of this fact. She vainly sought to penetrate the darkness sufficiently to distinguish his features.

"Who are you?" she said, in an impatient tone.

The man laughed.

"Is your memory so treacherous, then?" he asked. "Do you not remember me, Miss Denvil?"

"Gilbert Belmont!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, Gilbert Belmont. I know you at once, Marcia. I had no need to ask your name."

The accents were full of reproach. Marcia blushed, though conscious that no eye could witness her confusion, for the surrounding gloom.

A word of explanation, just here. Marcia had met Gilbert Belmont at several fashionable

parties of late, having made his acquaintance at a *bal masque* the previous winter.

Of the man's ancestry, she knew nothing whatever; nor could any of her fashionable friends afford her any light on the subject. It was, without doubt, a subject that would not admit of too close an investigation.

He had managed to slide into "good society" in some one of those mysterious ways in which many resolute but unprincipled adventurers accomplish the same object.

He always dressed in unexceptionable taste, and appeared to be very wealthy. But the manner in which this wealth had been acquired—if, indeed, it was not a myth and a delusion—was among the things occult and hidden from Dame Grundy's prying eyes.

From the first, he had attached himself to Marcia's suit, and was one of her most ardent admirers.

The girl herself was not indifferent to Belmont's handsome face and free-and-easy manners. But his position in society was of far too precarious a nature for the ambitious beauty to encourage his attentions.

She preferred to make her future certain by marrying Philip Jocelyn, of whom she was reasonably fond.

However, this unexpected encounter with Gilbert Belmont confused her not a little. She was thankful that the friendly shades of night concealed her embarrassment.

"How could I expect to meet you here?" she said, in reply to Belmont's reproachful speech.

"Why not?" he asked.

"It is so far from the city. Besides, you never come to Woodlawn."

"You forbade me to call on you."

"True."

"But," he went on, pressing her hand warmly, "I could not keep utterly away from your vicinity. Some subtle fascination has drawn me here, over and over again. If I could not rest under the same roof that sheltered you, Marcia, I was content to watch without."

"What?" she cried; "have you been here before to-night?"

"Several times."

There was a ring of triumph in his voice as he answered.

"Do you, then, love me so very much?" asked Marcia.

"Rapturously, my darling. What an angel you are!"

"Bah!" she said, laughing. "I'm afraid you don't know my sex very well, Mr. Belmont. Every woman has some attribute of the devil in her."

"I am not sure of that."

"And I am like all the rest of my kind," she added.

"No matter. I love you."

Marcia turned abruptly away. The topic of love was forbidden between them, and she dared not suffer the conversation to go on.

"Let me go," she said, in a half-scared tone of voice. "I was looking for somebody."

"Mr. Jocelyn?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps I can tell you something about him."

"What?" she asked, sharply.

"He is not here, as you can see for yourself. He followed the carriage that drove away, just now."

"On foot?"

"On foot."

"Then he is not likely to overtake it," and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Not unless he is a veritable John Gilpin," laughed Belmont, disdainfully.

"Who was in the carriage?"

"A man and a young lady."

Marcia sought again to see his face, that she might read its expression. She wondered how much of the truth he knew or had discovered.

"Ah," she uttered, in a musing manner.

"It was evidently a case of abduction," he said, quietly. "Jocelyn must have been interested in some way, for he gave a great shout as the carriage rolled away, and darted after it."

"He must have seen and recognized its occupants."

"I think so."

"That is bad," she muttered. "I must tell mamma." Then, aloud, she said: "Were you seen by either of the parties?"

"No," half-disdainfully. "I was standing in the shadow of the hedge-row, and very wisely kept out of the way."

"Humph. You did not feel yourself called upon to interfere?"

He shrugged his shoulders, whimsically.

"My dear Marcia," he said, after a minute's

silence, "it was none of my business. I do not approve of meddling in another man's affairs."

The cool audacity of this reply secretly pleased Marcia. She recognized a kindred spirit in the man beside her—kindred in evil.

After lingering a few moments longer, she turned to retrace her steps to the house, conscious that she could do no good by remaining.

Belmont walked beside her. The two had nearly reached the east terrace when a dusky figure darted out of the shadow of some shrubbery and approached swiftly.

It was Mrs. Laudersdale. She had followed the others into the garden as soon as her strength would permit.

"You have brought Mr. Jocelyn back with you, Marcia," she said, in a feverishly hurried tone of voice. "I am glad of that."

In the darkness she had mistaken Belmont for Philip.

"Not so," returned Marcia. "This is Mr. Belmont, mamma."

A low cry fell from the frightened woman's lips. "Where is Philip?" she gasped. "Not with—"

She could say no more. Marcia leaned over her and told her what had happened in a few whispered words. She drew a deep breath of relief. Philip could scarcely overtake the carriage in which Mabel was being driven away, and if he did not, no very serious results were to be apprehended from that unfortunate meeting.

Calming her agitation, the guilty woman now had leisure to be curious concerning Marcia's companion. She very cleverly managed to lead the two across the lawn to a point fronting the drawing-room windows, where the light of the lamps within streamed full upon them.

By this aid she studied the face of Gilbert Belmont.

It was a dark, keen face, sensuous and passionate, and yet full of a certain subtle power. He was very elegant in his appearance, and the glance of his bold, black eye was piercing as that of a hawk.

His silk hat was in the highest possible state of polish. Real diamonds—as Mrs. Laudersdale felt assured, even in that uncertain light—sparkled in his shirt front and on his effeminately white hands.

While looking at him a shiver—a cold chill of indefinable dread—ran through every nerve of the wicked woman. She felt, somehow, as if his destiny always had been, and always would be, linked with her own in some mysterious manner.

"That man will bear studying," she said to herself, as she went slowly into the house. "I must manage to learn more of him, and at once. There is something about him that half-frightens me."

CHAPTER XII.

OLD HET TRIES HER POWER.

THREE or four days elapsed, and beyond the mere fact of being detained against her will in Old Het's establishment, Mabel Trevor suffered no ill-treatment whatever.

The dancing-girls, with the single exception of Julia, fought shy of her. None of them understood the real circumstances under which she had been brought to that place, and, with the singular uncharitableness which women are wont to exercise toward their own sex, they placed the worst possible construction on her presence there.

On the whole, Mabel was not sorry for this. It saved her from being made the victim of idle questionings and vulgar curiosity.

Handsome Hal, for his own part, lost no opportunity of speaking a pleasant word to the poor girl. Her pretty face interested and attracted him. Had she been old and ugly—unless possessed of power like the shriveled mistress of the house—he would not have noticed her in any manner. But, since she was young and pretty, he determined, in spite of Bill's warning, to play the gallant gentleman.

One person, at least, was not slow to read his purpose. And that person was Old Het.

But, with the cunning of a serpent, the jealous hag kept the rage and fury she really felt hidden in her own breast during the first few days. However, the spite she had all along entertained for Mabel grew and strengthened every hour, and with the mean cowardice of an ignoble mind, she secretly determined that the hapless girl should be made to suffer for having won so high a place in Handsome Hal's good graces.

She was not long in hitting upon a means of gratifying her malicious hatred.

She determined that Mabel should be put through the same exercises as the other girls, knowing well how revolting anything of the sort must be to her finer feelings.

"Miles said as how she might be taught to dance," the hag muttered to herself, with a chuckle of satisfaction, when she came to this decision; "and I'm bound to run to the end o' my rope with the hussy."

Hitherto, Mabel had been locked into a small side-chamber by herself while the practicing went on. The very next morning, instead of being led thither, as usual, she was conducted back to the dormitory by Old Het.

"It's high time you were making yourself useful, my pink and white lily," she said, crossly. "I've put up with your lazy, vagabond ways quite long enough."

"What can I do?" asked poor Mabel.

"You'll see soon enough—yes, you'll see."

The grin that accompanied these words was actually diabolical.

And Mabel did "see," for she and Old Het had scarcely established themselves at one end of the dormitory before the ballet girls came filing into the apartment.

Their first work was to drag all the couches into one corner, where they were heaped up promiscuously, leaving the middle of the floor perfectly clear.

Then, from a small closet, was brought forth wands and poles, besides various other paraphernalia to be used in the hour of practice.

"Form!" shrieked Old Het, at this instant, in a voice that might have startled the dead into life.

The girls instantly whirled into a line, Julia taking her place at their head.

They had scarcely done this when Handsome Hal—or Monsieur Deville, as he was called on the flaming posters of the theater where he "tripped the light, fantastic toe"—entered the apartment.

He nodded familiarly to Old Het, favored Mabel with a bow and an excruciating smile, then devoted himself to his pupils.

The old woman watched the evolutions of the girls with an appreciative eye for some moments; but presently her face began to darken, and she turned suddenly to Mabel, saying in a half-whisper:

"Now it is *your* turn."

The girl shuddered, but answered nothing. "Patty," Old Het went on, addressing a pale-faced girl, of about ten years of age, who was standing near, "bring me a string and the ball."

Patty seemed to comprehend the order very readily, for she hastened for the things required.

When they were brought, the virago shook Mabel rather roughly by the shoulder. "Now stand ahind that board, my lassy, with your back against the wall," she commanded.

The girl looked piteously at her persecutor, but did not stir.

"Do you hear?" roared the hag.

"Why am I to stand there?" Mabel asked, faintly.

"I ain't here to answer questions. Get ahind o' the board, I tell you! Don't dare to resist me."

At this instant Julia, who had kept her eye on the two all along, came sliding up to our heroine.

"Better do as she bids you," she whispered, hurriedly. "It's of no use to hold out."

Mabel, with a faint moan, crept between the board and the wall.

"Now I'll mark time," grinned the virago, as she took the ball, to which the string had been attached, in her hand. "You are to bob up and down as I drop the ball. Ready. One curtsy, two curtsy, three curtsy."

This exercise, as the reader may know, is to give suppleness to the limbs, and, in professional phrase, is termed "turning the leg."

But Mabel did not know that it was not some degrading exhibition the female fury had invented for her especial disgrace. In consequence, she never stirred.

"You hussy," shrieked Old Het, "why don't you keep time?"

"I can not do what you wish," said Mabel.

"You mean that you won't, eh?"

There was no reply. The eyes of the tigress flashed fire. All the venomous hatred she felt for the girl made itself visible in their filmy depths. She shook her clenched fist in Mabel's face.

"We'll see, you sulky vixen, whether you or I is the mistress in this 'ere house," she hissed, venomously.

She stalked to the closet door, and came back with a whip in her hand. Having forced Mabel

to her knees, she raised the whip over her head.

"Don't strike me! For the love of Heaven, donot strike me," implored the helpless girl.

"I'd like to kill you," roared Old Het.

The lash cut through the air, and descended with cruel force upon Mabel's ivory shoulders.

A single shrill scream issued from her lips; but it brought Handsome Hal dashing up from the other end of the apartment.

"Hang it, woman, what do you mean?" he yelled, wrenching the whip from Old Het's hand ere it could descend a second time.

"The vixen is stubborn," was the muttered answer. "Stand out o' the way. I won't have no meddlin' atween me and my own gals!"

She fairly foamed with fury; but Hal's vice-like grip on her arm did not relax.

"You shan't lay a finger on that girl," he cried. "You know me, Old Het, and I say you shan't! Compose yourself, you she-devil, or it may be the worse for you."

Such words coming from Handsome Hal quieted her as nothing else could have done. In a certain way she feared him; or, rather, perhaps, she feared to lose his favor. But there was no diminution of hatred and vindictive fury in the look she fixed upon Mabel's shrinking figure.

"I can't stand the hussy's nonsense," she muttered. "It ought to be beat out o' her. Let me go at her again."

"But I say no!"

At that she threw down the whip. "I can't resist you, my Apollo, she whimpered, pretending to have experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. "What you tells me to do that I does. If you were to tell me to turn every identical gal into the street I'd do it. For your sake that whimperin' beauty thall go scot free for to-day."

"Thank you," said Hal, coolly.

Mabel was crouching on the floor. Obeying the glance Hal gave her, Julia now came forward and raised her to her feet.

"You'd better be off while that old Jezebel is in the mood to let you go," the dancing-girl whispered.

Mabel moved toward the door of the side-chamber she had occupied on other occasions, supported by Julia. "Does—does—that creature often use the whip?" she asked, shuddering violently.

"Not often. But she is out of humor to-day."

"Would that I were out of this terrible place."

Julia pressed her hand. "Don't give up all hope, miss," she said, just above her breath. "Something may be done even yet."

Old Het, meanwhile, was trying to re-establish herself in Handsome Hal's good graces. Her singular infatuation for the good-looking scamp would not permit her to suffer matters to go on as they were.

"I'm sorry for what happened, my beauty," she whined. "But the jade vexed me past all endurance. There was no bearin' with her."

"Humph."

The woman laid both her huge hands on his shoulders, and looked him steadily in the face.

"Hal," she said, sharply, "you're gettin' uncommon fond o' that gal. Don't you s'pose I can see it? You're half in love with her."

He gave a sniff of disdain.

"It's no such thing," he muttered. "But I can't bear to see her abused. That's the long and short of the whole matter."

Het was far from being convinced that this was the case, however. But Hal hurried back to his task of instructing the girls in the last new sensation of the boards, and so the conversation ended.

"If he thinks I'm done with that vixen, he's mistaken," the virago said to herself, the instant Hal's back was turned. "I was a fool for bringing her under this roof, and wish she was well away from it, providin' the money would be mine all the same. But I'll take her down a peg or two—now see if I don't!"

The threat was not uttered aloud; but the infamous creature intended to put it into execution all the same.

That night, after the last of the ballet-girls had returned from the theater, and while poor Mabel lay sobbing, as if her heart would break, in her little bed in the dormitory, a warm breath suddenly fanned her cheek, and two loving arms encircled her neck.

"Hush!" whispered a scarcely audible voice. "It is I—Julia. Don't make a loud noise. I've come to help you."

"What can you do?" asked Mabel.

"There's a key to the dormitory. You know Old Het locks us in every night. Take it. Wait an hour or two longer, until the girls are all asleep, and then let yourself out with it."

Mabel felt some cold object thrust into her

hand. "Where did you get the key?" she asked. "Old Het has two. I stole this one from her box in the bedroom while she was at supper. Now, not a word more. You know the way down stairs. The key of the street door hangs on a peg in the hall."

"God bless you," murmured Mabel. "Why will you not go away with me?"

"I can't. I've no place to go to. Besides Old Het treats me well enough. I bring her in a good deal of money, you see. But she mustn't know that I helped you. Good-by."

Julia crept away in the darkness without uttering another word.

Alternately sobbing and praying, Mabel waited until the hour was at an end. Then she softly left her bed and approached the door. The key turned noiselessly in the lock. The knob yielded to her touch, and, in another instant, she was on the landing without.

She groped her way to the ruinous staircase, and tried the topmost step.

It creaked sharply under her tread.

At the same instant a sudden gleam of light flashed over her from an open doorway near at hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BOLD, BAD WOMAN.

It is now necessary that we go back to the morning subsequent to Mabel Trevor's forced departure from the boat-house at Woodlawn, where she had been detained a prisoner by the orders of Mrs. Laudersdale.

On this particular morning, the hour was very late when Mrs. Laudersdale quitted her suit of private apartments and descended to the breakfast-room.

She could scarcely have rested well, for her face was nearly colorless, and dark circles could plainly be discerned underneath her eyes.

She ate her breakfast in silence. Jane Burt entered the room just as she was rising from the table. Mrs. Laudersdale knitted her brow in perplexed thought, for a minute or two, but presently said:

"Jane, where is your master?"

"He went to the city, some hours since, madam," replied the very demure maid.

"And Marcia?"

"Has gone for her morning walk."

"Good." Mrs. Laudersdale stepped to the library door and threw it open. "Jane," she said, then, looking back, "send Bill Cuppings to me."

"Ah-ha!"

A sort of double exclamation, but these two words, coming from Jane, meant volumes. She at once departed on her errand, however.

Five minutes later, Bill Cuppings entered the library where Mrs. Laudersdale sat, quietly awaiting his coming.

She acknowledged his entrance by a half-nod. "Pray be seated," she said, pointing to a chair near her own.

A smile of peculiar meaning curled the villain's thin lips.

"What!" he cried, with a palpable sneer, "may I really venture to sit in your presence, my lady?"

"Of course."

"Somebody might come upon us unexpectedly."

"Bah!"

"In which event it would be considered very strange that a servant should be closeted with his mistress in confidential talk," went on Bill, that disagreeable sneer still curling his lip.

"The coast is clear," said Mrs. Laudersdale, angrily. "I am not the woman to run risks without first weighing the consequences."

"True, true," said the exasperating rogue.

He sat down, and looked sharply at his mistress. He had a secret to keep now, and any weakness on his part would surely betray this fact to the sharp-sighted woman before him. If he feigned to be studying her face, she would be less apt to notice. Mrs. Laudersdale waited for him to take the initiative, which he was determined not to do.

"Well," she said, at last, in an impatient tone. He drew his chair somewhat nearer. "I suppose you are anxious to learn the result of the little episode that occurred last night," he ventured.

"Yes. Speak quickly. Where is the girl?"

"Can't you guess?"

The guilty woman turned deadly pale. "No, no!" she cried. "You must tell me in so many words what you and Miles did with her."

"She is dead."

He uttered the lie in a perfectly composed tone of voice. His gaze never once wandered

from the ghastly countenance of his mistress. Mrs. Laudersdale had not the faintest suspicion that he had broken faith with her.

A slight cry escaped her lips; but it was a cry of relief. She seemed to see the breakers receding that had threatened to overwhelm and ruin her.

"How did you manage it?" she whispered.

"Easily enough. Miles enticed the girl from the grounds, and we carried her off in a cab we had hired for that purpose."

"What then?"

He drew his hand significantly across his throat.

"She is taking a pretty long snooze in the North river," he said, brutally. "Would you like to hear the particulars?"

"Never mind." The wicked woman shuddered in spite of herself. "Now, I suppose, you want the money I promised you?"

"As soon as convenient, my lady."

"You shall have your share of it this very day—after I have found time to visit my banker."

"And Miles?"

"I will see him, and settle with him myself."

"Indeed!" There was an ugly smile on Bill's lips as he rose to go. He would have given half the promised reward to have been told the precise nature of the secret his brother and Mrs. Laudersdale held in common.

"I'll find it out yet," he muttered, as he slowly wended his way toward the servants' hall.

Just at present, however, his chief concern was to prevent the wily woman from discovering how utterly he had deceived her in pretending that he had put Mabel out of the way, in accordance with the full spirit of her instructions.

He hoped to profit, in more ways than one, even yet, by her continued existence.

As for Mrs. Laudersdale herself, she felt no remorse because of the crime that she supposed had been perpetrated. Her only emotions were of relief and satisfaction. While Mabel lived, the sword of Damocles had hung suspended over her head; and now that sword was removed.

A few minutes after Bill Cuppings had quitted the library a servant appeared to announce a visitor.

This visitor, to Mrs. Laudersdale's surprise and consternation, proved to be Philip Jocelyn.

At first she was tempted not to see him. But an instant's reflection convinced her that such a movement on her part would be unwise; therefore she ordered the servant to show him in.

He looked pale and haggard, and advancing slowly into the apartment, paused directly before Mrs. Laudersdale with his arms folded upon his breast.

"You told me a falsehood last night," he said, in a low, deep tone of voice.

She looked up at him haughtily. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"There is such a person as Mabel Trevor, and you know it."

She neither moved nor answered.

"She was hidden somewhere in these grounds at the very moment when I stood on yonder terrace inquiring for her," he went on, excitedly. "She was hidden in these grounds, and you knew it."

The well-arched brows of Mrs. Laudersdale became slightly elevated.

"You make very strange accusations, Mr. Jocelyn."

"But true ones," he said, sternly. "I, myself, saw the girl, after I left your side, last night. She was in the hands of two ruffians. They took her away in a close carriage."

"Why should you link me with the doings of two strange men?"

"One of those men was your servant. Of that I am thoroughly convinced."

Had Mrs. Laudersdale reposed a trifle less of confidence in Bill's story, she would have been at her wits' end on hearing these very plain words from Philip Jocelyn. But feeling assured that Mabel was really out of the way and could never appear against her in this life, she was only a trifle disconcerted.

"Produce this girl, this Mabel Trevor, and bring her face to face with me," she said, haughtily. "I shall then hope to convince you how utterly and entirely groundless are your suspicions."

"Would that I could produce her," cried Philip.

He suddenly caught her hand, and wrung it violently. "For the love of heaven, listen to me," he exclaimed. "Forego your wicked purpose so far as that innocent girl is concerned. Forego it, and I promise that she shall never

trouble you in any manner. All I ask is her life and liberty."

"What do you mean by addressing such words to me?" said Mrs. Laudersdale, in a tone of well-affected amazement. "You are beside yourself."

"Yes, I am mad, or nearly so—mad with misery and pain. Mabel may be dead for aught I know. She is certainly in great peril. The uncertainty of her fate drives me desperate."

The wicked woman eyed him coolly.

"Why didn't you follow the carriage in which, as you say, the girl was driven away?" she asked.

"I did follow it for some distance. But I was on foot, and it soon left me far behind. I have hunted all night, but vainly. As a last resort, I came back to Woodlawn, hoping to move your stubborn heart to sympathy—hoping that you might be persuaded to give up your fell purpose, and help me to find Mabel."

"Then you believe that impostor's story?"

"Fully."

Mrs. Laudersdale bit her lip, but said nothing. She knew it would be useless to argue with him in his present state of mind.

"I might have had my doubts last night," he added, speaking still in a low, decided voice. "But the last one was removed by what I saw after leaving your side. I am now convinced that Mabel told me the truth."

The wily Jezebel heaved a deep sigh.

"I am sorry, very sorry, that you should think so illy of me, as you must think, if you give credence to that girl's story," she said. "But I will not quarrel with you. By-and-by you will be convinced of your mistake, and feel sorry for the rash words you have addressed to me this morning. Till then it is better that we see very little of each other. Let us part friends, however."

She held out her hand with such a sweet, half-regretful smile, that Philip, for his life could not help taking it in his own.

"Then you will not help me?" he said.

"How can I?" she sighed.

He turned at that, and reluctantly quitted the room.

In crossing the hall he encountered Chloe, a colored servant, who, he had heard, had been for many years in Jasper Laudersdale's employ. Despite the agitated state of his mind, it suddenly occurred to him that he might, perhaps, learn from this old woman the real cause of Mrs. Laudersdale's hatred of Mabel Trevor.

That hatred was certainly to be accounted for by something that had occurred years and years ago, and Chloe might, inadvertently inform him what that "something" was, or, at least, let fall some hint that would be of use to him.

If he knew exactly why the wicked woman disliked and feared Mabel, he would the better be able to tell what she had done with her.

Acting upon this thought he slipped a gold-piece into Chloe's hand.

"Are you very busy, just now?" he asked.

"Not particular, mas'r," she answered, grinning from ear to ear.

"So much the better. I have a word to say to you in private. Will you follow me down to the garden gate as soon as you can do so, without calling attention to your movements?"

Chloe looked at the gold-piece in her hand, and nodded a willing assent.

Philip hurried down the path, and stood with both elbows leaned upon the garden wall, attempting to arrange his thoughts for the coming interview.

He had not long to wait. In less than five minutes Chloe joined him at the gate.

"Now, mas'r," she began, with a business-like air, the instant she presented herself, "I spects you want to pump me. Out wid it," and she confronted him with an evident eagerness to be pumped.

Perhaps the solitary gold-piece looked lonely, and she hoped to gain a companion for it.

Philip did not have many questions to ask, but the few were put with the greatest possible care, and every one was to the point.

What he learned was briefly this:

Chloe had, in fact, been Jasper Laudersdale's servant previous to his second marriage.

She remembered her first mistress very well. She had been a "great lady," and everybody had loved her. Jasper had actually idolized her. She had died very suddenly—it was not precisely known of what complaint.

There had been but one child—a daughter scarcely more than two years old. On the very day of the first Mrs. Laudersdale's death the child had strayed away from her nurse, while

they were walking in the grounds, and been drowned.

Thus had the husband and father been stricken by a double blow in the selfsame day.

The body of the child was never recovered.

This was the purport of what Chloe had to tell in reply to Philip's eager questionings.

The young man could not learn that Jasper Laudersdale had even been acquainted with his present wife at the time of the first Mrs. Laudersdale's death.

When he finally turned to go away—after having pressed a second *douceur* upon the now-wise unwilling Chloe—the light he had gained was very meager and unsatisfactory indeed.

"It can't be that Mabel is the child that was supposed to be drowned, and Mrs. Laudersdale is cognizant of that fact," he muttered thoughtfully, as he went striding down the lane. "If so, the truth ought to have been discovered long enough since."

Nevertheless, such a supposition explained much that was mysterious, and he could not thrust the idea lightly from his mind.

It strengthened his determination to bend every energy to the task of discovering what had become of the missing girl.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FOWLER'S SNARE.

Now, simply promising that Philip had gone on with his search for Mabel, though without finding a single clue to guide him, we will take up our narrative at the point where it was dropped in the last chapter but one.

A gleam of light had flashed upon Mabel while she stood at the top of the ruinous flight of stairs, seeking to make her escape from Het Bender's clutches.

A door had suddenly been opened within five or six feet of the spot where she stood.

Mabel's feet seemed to be rooted to the floor at first. Her blue eyes dilated with terror and despair, and a low cry fell from her lips.

Old Het stood in the doorway, looking out upon her with the malignant cunning of a fiend.

"He, hel my pretty dove," she chuckled. "Tryin' your wings, eh?"

At the sound of that hated voice, Mabel broke the bonds of horror that held her powerless. Shrieking out at the top of her voice, she fled down the staircase into the pitying darkness of the lower hall.

At the same instant, the slipshod servant-girl named Peggy made her appearance.

"Arter her!" screamed Het, pushing the maid toward the stairs. "Don't let the hussy get away."

Peggy scrambled down to the lower hall. She was familiar with the way, and our heroine was not. Consequently she was soon clasp ing in her brawny arms the shrinking figure she had found leaning against the wall.

"I've got her, Old Het," she bawled. "I've got her!"

"Hold her fast, then."

Het hobbled down the staircase to the spot where the two stood, chuckling to herself as she went.

"I s'pected what was up," she cried, shaking her fist in Mabel's white face, when she had reached her side. "I missed the key, and have been on the watch for ye. Lucky I did so, now wasn't it?"

The young girl was unable to answer.

"Sulky, eh? I don't wonder. It ain't very pleasant to be stopped when one has set her mind on runnin' away. But it was sort o' necessary that we should stop you, my lady. So come along up-stairs and be locked in again. I've lost sleep enough on your 'count a'ready."

Then, as if a sudden suspicion had occurred to her, the female fury seized both Mabel's delicate wrists in one of her huge hands, and bent her ugly, distorted face close to the quivering one of her captive.

"Where did you get the key?" she hissed, sharply. "Who stole it out o' my box for you?" Mabel did not answer.

"Speak!" screamed the tigress. "Was it Handsome Hal?"

"No," was the faint reply.

"You lie! Who else knew where I kept it? It was Hal; and you've bewitched him with your pink-and-white face. You've made a traitor of him. Don't you think I've seen it all? Oh, you vixen! I wish you'd been dead afore you ever crossed the threshold of this house!"

Her grasp on Mabel's wrist tightened until the latter almost screamed with pain. "Let me go, for the love of Heaven, let me go!" she moaned. "I tell you it was not Hal who gave me the key."

"Who, then?"

"I will not tell you."

She was determined, on no account, to betray Julia.

Old Het stood panting and bristling for several minutes, apparently undecided what to do. But finally she loosened her grip, and growled out in a savage tone of voice:

"Come, my pretty, and be locked in."

Mabel suffered herself to be led up the stairs again, between Old Het and Peggy. She was not conducted to the dormitory, however, but pushed into one of the smaller side-chambers.

"Go in there," said the old woman, as she closed the door upon her, "and do your plottin' and plannin' all to yourself. I reckon you'll not get out in a hurry, this time."

The moment she was left alone, Mabel fell to the floor in a half-unconscious state.

The reaction from hope to utter despair had proved too much for her.

The light of a new day was flooding the earth with its radiance when she again awoke to perfect consciousness.

But a few dim rays, however, penetrated to her squalid prison.

Several hours wore on, and nobody came nigh her. She was beginning to feel weak and ill from long fasting, when a key grated in the door-lock, and Julia entered the room, bringing a slice of bread and a cup of tea.

"Hush!" the ballet-girl whispered, seeing that Mabel was about to speak. "Not a word yet."

She carefully closed the door and approached closely to the captive's side.

"Now you may speak, my friend. But be careful to keep your voice lowered. Tell me how you happened to fail in making your escape last night."

Mabel hurriedly related what had occurred.

"I knew you were discovered and brought back again," Julia said, when the recital was ended, "but I did not know in what manner. And so you think Old Het has no suspicion that I gave you the key by which you let yourself out of the dormitory?"

"I am sure of it."

"So am I, in fact. To be frank, I've been abusing you roundly in her presence. She is convinced that I dislike you as bitterly as she does. Otherwise she would not have given me permission to bring up your breakfast."

The ballet-girl smiled at the thought of her own cleverness in managing Old Het.

"It was very kind of you to come," said Mabel, gently.

"I promised to be your friend, and I'll stick to my promise, let what will come of it. Now tell me as briefly as possible what you intend to do."

"Alas, I can do nothing."

"Have you no friends who will be looking for you?"

"Not one."

The words had scarcely escaped the girl's lips when she thought of Philip. He had seemed to be deeply interested in her welfare. She had no right to doubt the sincerity and strength of his friendship.

"I was wrong," she added, hastily, a burning blush mantling her cheeks. "There is one who, I am satisfied, would spare no effort to effect my release, did he know where to find me."

"Your lover?" said Julia, slyly.

"No, he is not my lover," Mabel replied, blushing more deeply than ever.

"What is his name?"

"Philip Jocelyn."

The face of the ballet-girl brightened with a sudden resolution. "Tell me where to find him," she cried, "and I will take any message to him that you may see fit to send."

"Alas, I can not."

Julia looked very much surprised. "Does he reside in New York?" she asked, after a minute's thinking.

"He does."

"Then I may succeed in finding him. Meanwhile, have you no other friend upon whom you can rely?"

For manifest reasons, Mabel dared not send her new acquaintance to Woodlawn, since everybody there, save Mr. Laudersdale himself, was opposed to her; so she slowly shook her head.

"Julia now turned to go. 'I dare not linger a moment longer,' she said. 'But, don't despair. Something may be done, even yet; and I'll manage to see you again as soon as possible.'"

With these encouraging words, she went away.

Old Het, meanwhile, was sipping gin and water in the privacy of her own apartment,

and busily revolving a scheme that had suggested itself to her fertile brain the day before.

But for this "scheme" I am inclined to think she would have suffered Mabel to escape without attempting interference of any sort, so jealous was she of the influence the lonely but hapless girl was likely to exert upon Handsome Hal.

Even the passion of greed was less strong than the other passion.

"But, by carrying out the 'scheme' that had suggested itself, she might, at the same time, get rid of her hated rival, and have a terrible revenge upon her for having attracted Hal's admiration.

She hoped, too, to be able to realize a larger sum of money than she was likely to obtain by keeping Mabel a prisoner.

The nature of the "scheme" we will now proceed to unfold.

About two hours after dark, when the ballet-girls had departed for the various theaters where they were employed, Old Het, after having given Peggy especial injunctions to keep a close watch upon Mabel, dressed herself with more than usual care, and quitted the house.

Having turned her back on the precincts of Slaughter-House Point, she hailed a passing cab, and proceeded in the direction of upper Broadway.

"I reckon I can afford to treat myself to a ride," she chuckled, on finding herself comfortably seated inside the vehicle. "For if I don't make money out of this journey, and a good bit, too, my name ain't Het Bender."

And a smile of satisfaction curled her thin lips.

Having arrived in the vicinity of upper Broadway, the woman dismissed the cab, intending to finish her journey on foot.

With the air of a person perfectly familiar with the neighborhood, she directed her steps to a somewhat imposing building, from the windows of which bright lights were flashing.

A servant answered her ring, and she stepped into a richly-furnished hall the instant the door was opened sufficiently wide to admit her.

Two or three doors leading from this hall stood ajar; and the low murmur of voices, mingled with the rattling of dice and jingling of glasses, came distinctly to the old woman's ears from the room beyond.

In brief, she was in what is termed a first-class faro house.

"Your business, madam?" said the servant, politely; in these modern hells it is the custom to be polite to everybody.

"I want to see Gilbert Belmont," she replied, gruffly. "Tell him it's Old Het, and he won't be likely to keep me waitin'. He knows me too well for that."

The servant departed with the message. In less than five minutes thereafter, the tall, handsome figure of Gilbert Belmont was to be seen advancing along the hall.

The reader is about to know more of this man's true character than Marcia Denvil herself knew. He was a "gambler in good luck."

A slight frown contracted his handsome brow as he approached the spot where Old Het was standing.

"What brings you here?" he asked, in any thing but a pleased tone of voice.

"Business," she answered, briefly.

"Confound it, woman, do you mean your business or mine?"

"Yours."

His countenance brightened, and he looked at her sharply for a minute or two. "Come into the blue-room," he said, leading the way to a small side apartment, the key of which he produced from one of his pockets. "We'll not be interrupted there."

The old woman kept close to his heels, chuckling softly as they proceeded. "Now, Jezebel," he cried, confronting her the instant they were safely closeted together, "speak out! Tell me what brought you here?"

"I've netted a bird for you."

The eyes of the two met for a moment; a dull glitter came into the orbs of Gilbert Belmont. "A bird?" he repeated.

"That's what I said, sir," and Old Het showed her fang-like teeth in a horrible grin. "A regular built angel, sir. I doubt if you've seen any thing like her for a month of Sundays."

"Capital. Who is she?"

"She calls herself Mabel Trevor."

"And where is she to be found?"

The hag wrinkled her face into a leer, and laughed again.

"You'll learn that," she answered, cunningly, "when you've told me whether you want the girl or not—"

"Of course I want her," he interrupted.
 "—And how much you will give me for puttin' her into your hands," she added.
 The rascal shrugged his shoulders whimsically.
 "Would two hundred dollars be a temptation?" he asked.
 "It might."
 "You shall have that sum if the girl is all you represent her to be."
 "She's pretty as a picture, an' no mistake."
 "You agree to my terms?"
 "Yes."
 "The girl has no friends who are likely to interfere?"

Old Het thought of Miles and Bill, and a momentary spasm of fear distorted her repulsive face. She knew them to be desperate men, and relentless as the grave. Did they so much as suspect her of treachery, they were sure to deal out retribution swift and terrible.

In making a bargain with Belmont she was running a great risk.

Her jealous hatred of Mabel would not permit her to be deterred from her scheme unless the odds were fearfully against it, however.

Besides, she had hoped to be able to make it appear that the girl had eluded her vigilance, and account in that way, to Miles and Bill, for her disappearance.

She had weighed all the chances as carefully as possible, and was determined to make the venture.

Belmont repeated his question. "Has the girl no friends?"

"None who are likely to give you trouble," was the gruff response.

"And you?"

"Bah! I shall look out for myself. You must leave me to manage the affair, and I reckon no harm can befall anybody. Do you agree?"

"Tell me, in so many words, your reason for making the request."

"Listen. The girl is an orphan. There are only two men in the world who would make the slightest fuss, no matter what happened to her."

Old Het drew on her own imagination for a part of this statement; but Belmont believed her.

"Are those men persons of influence?"

"No; they are common ruffians."

"Umph!" he said, with a shrug. "Then I shall not take them into the account at all."

"But they may be dangerous," suggested Het.

"I do not fear them."
 "And I do!" remarked the woman, with considerable emphasis. "They brought me the girl that I might keep her safe for them; and they ain't the sort of men one likes to trifle with. When the girl goes away from my house, it must appear like an abduction, or something o' that sort."

Belmont laughed low.

"That can easily be managed, Old Het. And so the girl is now at your house?"

"Yes," she answered, giving a half-angry snarl. "I didn't mean to tell you so until the business was settled. But it can't matter very much. You won't go back on me arter I've taken the trouble to come all this distance to see you."

"No, no. But I must have a glimpse of the girl before we bind the bargain. Do you think it can be managed?"

"Perhaps," she said, reflectively. "Come to Slaughter-house Point at four o'clock to-morrow, and we'll see what can be done. You know where to find me!"

"Yes."

"Be punctual, then. And the sooner the hussy is in your clutches, the better I'll be pleased."

"You don't like her?"

"No," sharply. Old Het now turned to go. "Have you any more questions to ask?" she said, with her hand on the door-knob.

"None. Good-night, my ancient beauty. Expect me at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon. I am anxious to gain a glimpse of my prize, and shall not fail you."

The old woman bobbed him a half-mocking courtesy, and then quitted the house, and slowly pushed her way through the darkness in the direction of Slaughter-house Point.

CHAPTER XV.

A SUCCESSFUL PLOT.

WHEN the afternoon of the next day came round, Het Bender ensconced herself in an easy-chair in her dingy sitting-room where she awaited with no small degree of impatience, the arrival of her expected visitor.

She had the happy consciousness of knowing that Mabel Trevor was safe under lock and key, and that she was likely not only to make quite

a sum of money out of her, but—which was far better in her present state of mind—she could consign the girl to a fate such as would satisfy even her revengeful wishes.

"It's worth the risk, all things considered," she muttered, thoughtfully. "Two hundred don't grow on every bush. I shouldn't get half that amount from Miles, and the trouble would be trebled."

Then she resolutely put away the images of the two ruffians who had consigned Mabel to her keeping. It only unnerved her to think of them. And the better to banish them from her mind, she fortified her spirits with a stiff glass of brandy.

The way was clear for the contemplated interview. She had so managed that the ballet-girls were all busily practicing in the dormitory when the hour of four came round. There was scarcely the probability of an interruption.

Punctual to the minute, Gilbert Belmont made his appearance at the door, and was conducted up the creaking staircase to her mistress's sitting-room by the faithful Peggy.

Old Het greeted him with a bob of her head, and a cunning grin.

"And so you've come to take a peep at your sweetheart, eh?" she said, sharply.

"I told you I would come," returned Belmont.

"In course you did. You'll find I've told you the truth about the gal, too. She's as pretty as they are made, and no mistake."

Belmont shrugged his shoulders.

"Leave me to judge of that, my good woman."

"You shall see for yourself, and at once."

She rose, and hobbled toward the door. The young man followed her somewhat reluctantly.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"To the gal's room, of course."

"She may not be pleased with the intrusion."

Vile as he was, Belmont shrunk from forcing his presence upon a pure-minded girl for so base an object.

"What matter?" grinned Old Het. "The vixen can't help herself. She's in our power; and then she can't do any thing worse than to set up a wretched screechin', and I can soon put a stop to that."

Belmont did not feel like giving up the game at this early stage, and so he followed to the chamber of which Mabel Trevor was an enforced inmate.

Old Het noiselessly unlocked the door, and as noiselessly pushed it open.

Then, after having taken a single step into the apartment, she looked back suddenly and raised a warning finger to her lip.

"Hush!" she said, in a whisper. "The gal's asleep. We'd better not waken her."

"No, don't waken her," Belmont returned, in the same low tone.

The two advanced on their toes to the center of the apartment, where they paused; the old woman then pointed toward a couch that stood in one corner, and said, with a grin of triumph: "Look there, will you? Pretty ain't no name for her! She looks like an angel jest let down from heaven."

Belmont's eyes followed the direction of her finger, and then he stood as if spellbound, gazing at the glowing image revealed to his sight.

It was, indeed, a vision of entrancing loveliness. The sleeping girl lay on the couch with her head half-buried in the pillow, over which a wealth of rippling yellow hair flowed in wanton profuseness.

The rosebud lips were slightly parted, and a soft color, delicate as the pink in the heart of a sea shell, suffused either cheek.

A gentle sigh leaved her bosom now and then, and two pearly drops had scarcely escaped from underneath the fringed lids of the closed eyes.

Even in sleep, evidently, she could not forget her unhappiness.

Belmont gazed on her like one entranced, for some minutes. At last he drew a deep breath.

"What do you think o' the gal?" grinned Old Het.

"She is perfect—incomparable!"

"He, he! You'd better make it three hundred, and so be sure of such a prize."

"Willingly."

"Good. That's like talkin'," and the hag smacked her lips. "Now, if you've looked your fill at the gal, come away and we'll talk business."

They quitted the chamber, and hastily crossed to Old Het's own sitting-room.

They had scarcely closed the door behind them, however, when a figure rose up from an angle of the passage where it had been crouching, and followed them.

It was Julia.

She did not enter the apartment, however, but paused at the door and applied her ear to the keyhole. The good-hearted girl suspected that mischief was brewing, and intended to learn the precise nature of it.

The two arch-plotters had seated themselves near the door.

"Now, Gilbert Belmont," Julia heard Old Het say, "let us proceed to arrange our plans."

"Hush," cried the well-dressed rascal, in an angry tone of voice. "Don't mention my name, if you please, in this confounded hole."

"Humph! I'll be careful—you may rest assured of that, my fine fellow. There's no eaves-droppin' around my premises."

"I don't believe in unnecessary risks."

"No more do I," returned Old Het. "But we ain't runnin' any risks—leastwise you ain't. But enough o' that. Now we'll come to an understandin'. I'm to give up the girl to you for three hundred dollars. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Dirt cheap, considerin' every thing. Why, if my part o' the transaction were to be found out, I'd have to slide for it."

"Maybe."

"I tell you that I would," growled the woman. "We must manage things mighty keerful. When do you reckon on takin' the gal away?"

Julia, on whom not a word of this conversation had been lost, actually held her breath to catch the reply. It came after a minute's silence.

"This very night."

"Good," chuckled Old Het. "Be on the watch at least an hour afore midnight. I'll manage to drop a key in the gal's room so that she'll be sure to see it. Of course she'll try to git away. Be ready to nab her the minute she leaves the house."

"Yes, yes."

"That's the best I can do. I don't dare work open-handed, you see. You are sure you understand every thing?"

"Perfectly."

"Where will you take the gal?"

"That's my business," returned Belmont, somewhat sharply.

"Of course."

"I don't mind telling you, however," he added. "I've got a snug little house up in Westchester county. It isn't far from the city, but she'll be safe enough there."

Julia waited to hear no more. Her bosom heaving with indignation toward the arch-plotters, she turned and fled along the passage, thinking to warn Mabel of her danger.

She found Peggy standing like a statue before the door of the locked chamber. She could not even call to the girl from without.

"What is the meaning of this extra vigilance?" she said to herself, in real perplexity. "Am I, or is anybody, suspected of sympathizing with that hapless captive?"

She was compelled to beat a hasty retreat and return to the dormitory.

Several times thereafter she ventured forth with the hope of being enabled to whisper a word or two through the keyhole—sufficient to put Mabel on her guard. But the door was always watched.

She found herself at her wits' end. Sometimes she was tempted to sally into the street and summon assistance of whatever sort. But Old Het was cunning as the devil, and would surely find means to circumvent her, even were she to do that.

It was better to wait, trusting in Mabel's God to take care of her.

So the hours went by. Julia would have made a last effort on returning from the theater that night, but Old Het hustled the girls into the dormitory with even less ceremony than usual, and locked the door upon them, as was her custom.

Let us now go back to the time when Gilbert Belmont took his departure.

After sitting in earnest meditation for some time, Old Het had filled a tray with eatables and proceeded to the chamber of her captive.

She found Mabel wide awake, on this occasion, and sitting dejectedly on the edge of the couch.

"Sulkin' still?" she snarled, setting down her tray. "Humph! You'll soon git over that, you vixen. You're havin' too easy a time of it, by far. I'll put you to work, to-morrow, if a dozen like Handsome Hal stand in the way. So you'd better make up your mind to it."

Mabel shuddered, but answered nothing.

Just as Old Het turned to leave the room, a key slid from her dress and fell almost noiselessly upon the floor. She went away without

appearing to have become aware of her loss.

Mabel heard her fumbling for some minutes afterward outside the door, and finally she went away. She had evidently locked the door with a duplicate.

With a throb of joy, the deceived girl picked up the key and thrust it into the bosom of her dress.

As her cunning jailer had calculated, she had already determined to make a second attempt to escape if the key should prove available.

As on the previous occasion, she waited until the house was quiet, and the last of the ballet-girls had come in.

Then, having tested the efficiency of the key, she made a few hurried preparations and crept noiselessly from the chamber.

Scarcely venturing to breathe, she stole down the creaking staircase and reached the lower hall without interruption of any sort.

The key of the outer door was in the lock. Old Het had taken pains that it should be left there.

The bolt shot back after a little difficulty. The door-knob then yielded to her touch, and Mabel felt a waft of purer air strike upon her face.

Joy, joy; she was in the street again!

She turned to dart away. At the same instant a dark form rose up from beside the steps, and before she could utter a single cry, a heavy cloak was thrown over her head and shoulders.

Then she felt herself lifted up in a pair of brawny arms, borne a little distance, and pushed into a carriage of some sort.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISSING.

OLD HET was now fairly "in for it," as the saying goes.

Having once delivered up her charge to the tender mercies of Gilbert Belmont, she could not safely neglect any means of concealing her treachery from Bill Cuppings and Miles.

It was a close game she had to play, but she was bold and had enough to carry it through.

The morning subsequent to Mabel's unfortunate flight, Old Het took care not to visit the chamber of which the girl had been an enforced inmate until long after the breakfast was over.

On the occasion of this visit, she pretended to make the discovery of our heroine's escape.

Her first care was to send Peggy to search for Miles in the various low haunts he was known to frequent, and inform him of what had happened.

This, of course, was done, to disarm suspicion.

Afterward, she played the angry and disappointed fury to perfection, scolding and railing at everybody who came within the sound of her voice.

When Handsome Hal made his appearance, as usual, to look after the practicing of the dancing-girls, she met him with well-simulated anger.

"Curse you," she screamed, shaking her fist in his face, "what have you been up to?"

The good-looking rascal stared at her in dire amazement. He had not heard the news, as yet.

"What's wrong?" he growled.

"What's wrong?" shrieked the virago. "Every thing's wrong, I tell you! I'm a ruined woman, and all o' your cursed interference."

"Do compose yourself, you delectable queen of beauty, and tell me what has happened."

Old Het would never have endured such talk from anybody but Hal; he, however, was privileged to say what he pleased to her.

"As if you didn't know!" she retorted. "I 'spected how 't would end when you begun to be sweet on the gal. You've spirited her away, and Miles 'll make me answer for it."

Handsome Hal uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"You don't mean to say that Miss Trevor has escaped?" he cried.

"Yes, she's gone. And I *know* she never got away without help. Oh, my Apollo, how could you be so cruel? You've ruined me, jest as sure as we two stand here. Miles 'll kill me when he comes to know of this."

"No, he won't."

"Who's to hinder?"

"I will."

She threw out both her shriveled hands to him in a gesture of wild entreaty.

"Bring her back, my Apollo, bring her back!" she screamed. "That's the only way to set the matter all right with Miles. Bring her back, I say, or I'll not get a penny for my trouble ever since the jade came under this roof."

Her accents were much more piteous than they would have been but for the fact that she

knew Miles himself had just made his appearance with Peggy, and was standing near the door of the apartment in which this conversation was being held.

The villain's ugly face looked uglier than ever, so distorted it was with passion and disappointed hope.

Unless Mabel could be found, his scheme of enriching himself through her must, of necessity, come to naught.

"This is a pretty go," he growled, striding into the room. "What did you mean by letting that girl escape?"

Old Het turned in a well-acted start of surprise. "Ask *him* why he spirited her away," she exclaimed, immediately finding voice.

She pointed her finger as she spoke toward Handsome Hal.

Not that she expected or even wished Miles to believe that Hal had been concerned in the matter. Her only object was to divert suspicion from herself.

How could she do this better than by accusing somebody else of being in fault?

If Hal was likely to suffer any evil consequences, because of the accusation, she could manage to clear him, she thought, in time.

Miles shook her roughly by the arm. "What do you mean?" he growled.

"You know, as well as I do, that Hal was sweet on the gal," she answered. "What is more nat'ral than that he should have helped her off?"

"I know nothing of her," the young man asserted. "She didn't get any help from me. I've but just found out that she is missing."

Miles looked at him sharply and distrustfully. He could not forget the handsome scamp's very evident admiration of Mabel. It *did* look probable that he might have helped her to escape, in order to further his own base designs.

Hal bore his scrutiny without flinching, however. "Stare at me to your heart's content," he added, in a dogged tone of voice. "I've told you the truth. The girl was lovely as an houri, and I don't pretend to say that I wasn't just a little struck with her. But if she has fled from this house, it is without any assistance from me."

Much as he might have wished to doubt his word, Miles saw that he had spoken truly.

"The jade had help—I know she had help," whimpered Old Het. "I locked the door on her myself—and I'll swear to that."

"But she is gone."

"Yes, she is gone."

"Curse the luck," growled Miles.

"Curse the luck," echoed Het. "Now you won't pay me the money you promised for keepin' the gal for you."

Miles uttered a volley of curses.

"No, confound you! I'd sooner wring your neck, you old she-devil. And I may do it, too, if the girl isn't found."

These were rough words and uttered roughly; but there was none of that fiendish fury in them that would have been there if he had suspected old Het of treachery.

"Of course the jade must be found," she said, lowering the lids of her cunning eyes to conceal the gleam of triumph that came into them.

"Wouldn't I like to get her into my clutches again, though? I reckon she wouldn't care to run away the second time."

And a horrible chuckle ended her remarks.

Miles now proceeded to learn all that was possible of the manner in which Mabel must have left the house. He was unable to come to any positive conclusion whether she had any assistance from within or without or not. The whole affair seemed wrapped in an impenetrable mystery, for the old woman assured him that every one of the ballet-girls had been locked in the dormitory as usual, at the time when Mabel must have left the house.

"Not one of them," she asserted, "could have helped the hussy off. If Handsome Hal didn't do it, it must have been the devil hisself."

And so it was—a devil in the guise of a woman!

Miles reluctantly took his departure, after having spent considerable time in useless investigation—much to Old Het's secret relief.

He was delighted to escape so easily.

On leaving Slaughter-house Point, Miles crossed the river and took his way to Woodlawn.

It was of the first importance to acquaint Bill Cuppings with what had happened as soon as possible, since Mabel—for aught he knew to the contrary—might turn up at Woodlawn at any moment.

In that case, Mrs. Laudersdale would come to know of the deception he and Bill had practiced

upon her, in pretending that they had killed Mabel.

Indeed, he now half-regretted having spared the girl's life.

Not caring to approach too near the house, on arriving at the gate leading into the grounds, Miles waited until a boy passed that way, and sent a message by him to his brother.

Bill Cuppings soon made his appearance, approaching the gate with a hasty stride.

"Something has happened, Miles, or you would not be here," he said, quickly and sharply, the instant he was within speaking distance.

"The very deuce is to pay," growled Miles.

"What do you mean?"

"Hasn't *she* been here?"

"Who?"

"Mabel Trevor."

"No," muttered Bill. "You don't mean to tell me that she's at large?"

"But she is, though."

Bill gnashed his teeth with rage. "Tell me how it happened," he said, between his teeth.

Miles had soon told everything he knew. The two men looked at each other in angry perplexity for some minutes. Bill was the first to speak.

"What ought we to do?" he asked.

"Don't know. Make a clean breast of it to Mrs. Laudersdale, perhaps, and get her help in hunting up the girl."

Bill shook his head. "You don't know my mistress so well as I do," he said, "or you wouldn't propose any thing of that sort."

"Perhaps not," returned the other, with a shrewd smile.

Bill noticed the smile, and thought of the secret understanding that existed between the two. But this was not the time to speak of that.

"Mrs. Laudersdale must not be told that the girl is living, so long as there is a possibility of keeping that fact from her," he said, in a decided tone of voice. "You and I must try our own skill in hunting her up before she does us mischief."

"Humph. We have not the slightest clue."

"No matter. We must *find* one."

"Providing that we can."

"Of course. Things have a bad look, at the best. But we won't give up so long as there's the slightest use in kicking."

"No," grunted Miles.

"Do you return to New York, and search for Mabel there. I will keep watch at Woodlawn, and see that she does not surprise us."

"Agreed," and Miles took his departure.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FORTUNATE MEETING.

WHILE these two wicked men were so earnestly bent on finding the lost girl that their own selfish interests might be furthered, there was one other person whose thoughts and energies were directed in the same way, though with a very different motive.

This person was the ballet-girl—Julia. She had been reared among the off-scourings of the earth, and had had destitution, vice, and unblushing crime for daily companions. From her earliest infancy, being a waif and a cast-away, she had listened to oaths instead of blessings, to curses instead of prayers.

Nevertheless, her heart had not been wholly corrupted, and Mabel, with her modest looks and gentle ways, had crept into the softest corner of it.

She alone knew that our hapless heroine had been abducted, and was in the power of Gilbert Belmont.

But, of herself, she was powerless to help her; and she dared not confide in any of her associates at Old Het's.

Her only resource was to find Philip Jocelyn and tell him her simple story.

But how was she to do that, knowing no more of him than the mere fact that there was such a person?

Through the day she reflected upon the subject during all her minutes of leisure, but could come to no decision.

At night she went as usual to the theater, where she shone a star among the jaded dancing-girls, with her bright, brunette beauty and piquant ways, and produced the usual sensation among the idlers of the side-scenes.

When the ballet was over, and she had put on her wraps to depart, she encountered near the stage door a young man with whom she had long been on terms of intimacy.

He, too, danced for a living. He was a gay, good-natured fellow, in whose bosom beat a much nobler heart than many of his associates gave him the credit of possessing.

His real name was Richard Morton; but from his wild, rollicking ways and carelessness of consequences, he was generally known among his *confreres* as Dick Daredevil.

"Good-evening, Miss Julia," he said, favoring the dancing-girl with a careless nod. "That *pus seul* of yours was beautifully done—beautifully!"

Julia stopped, and looked at him for a minute or two. She was not thinking of the compliment, though. It had suddenly occurred to her that Dick might be made useful. He went about a great deal, and knew hosts of people.

"Dick," she said, laying her hand on his arm, "why can't you walk home with me to-night?"

"I can," he answered, stepping quickly to her side, looking very well pleased.

Julia blushed, but it was not the time to be over-scrupulous about propriety.

"Come, then," she said, gently. "I have something to say to you."

They stepped into the street, and had proceeded the length of the two squares, nearly, before she spoke again.

"Dick," she began, in a very abrupt tone of voice, "can you keep a secret?"

"Only try me, Miss Julia."

"I will, for I want your help."

"Has anybody been insulting you? Is it some scamp whom I am to knock down?"

"Nothing of the sort," she answered, smiling.

"What then?"

In the fewest words possible she narrated the circumstances under which Mabel Trevor had been brought to old Het's establishment, and also repeated the conversation she had overheard between the wicked old woman and Gilbert Belmont.

Dick gave a low chuckle when the gambler's name was mentioned.

"I know him," he interrupted. "He's a gay one—he is! There isn't a wicked man in all New York. And so you think the girl is in his clutches?"

"I am sure of it."

Dick made a wry face. "It isn't the first bird of the sort Belmont has netted," he muttered.

"Mabel has one friend, who, I am sure, would give anything in the world to know where to find her," Julia resumed. "And I want you to help him look her up, Dick."

"Of course. You know I was always very willing to assist in succoring beauty in distress. But who is this person of whom you speak?"

"Philip Jocelyn. I know his name, and no more. You must find him and tell him exactly what I have told you."

The young man slowly shook his head.

"Never heard of any such person," he muttered. "I might as well look for the girl and leave him alone. Perhaps it'll be as easy to find one as the other."

At this moment they were passing a somewhat dark alley running down to the next street. A savage oath or two greeted Dick's ears, of a sudden, and he heard the sound of a struggle. Looking down the alley, he saw three dark figures engaged in a fierce but unequal struggle, since two of them seemed to be pitted against the third.

To use a "slang phrase, his "blood was up" in a minute. "Cowards!" he shouted, at the top of his voice.

Then he darted into the alley and ran toward the scene of the conflict, calling out, as he did so, to his companion:

"Come on, Jule, come on!" We'll whip out these cowardly devils or know the reason why. Come on!"

In the intense excitement of the moment, Dick had forgotten that Julia might not be as much of a pugilist as himself.

When he reached the spot where the struggle had been going on, two of the men had fled and the third was lying on the pavement.

"Are you hurt?" Dick asked, stooping over him.

"Only a little bruised," I think, was the answer. "Those ruffians fought like tigers, and I'm quite out of breath with having to parry their blows."

"Did they attack you, sir?" Dick said, in a more respectful tone, for he saw now that he was addressing a gentleman.

"Yes."

"What could have been their object—plunder?"

"I am at a loss to tell. They seemed to be trying to make a prisoner of me, for they had neither knives nor pistols."

"Why should they do that?"

"I know not. But I was fast giving out

when you made your appearance and frightened them away."

He now staggered to his feet. By this time Julia had reached the spot. Dick took one of the gentleman's arms and signed for the girl to take the other.

"Let's be off as fast as possible," he exclaimed. "The police will be here in another minute."

The word "police" was amply sufficient to endow each of the three with energy. They well knew the trouble from detention and idle questionings that an encounter with the patrolmen was likely to cause them; so they hurriedly quitted the alley.

When they had proceeded to a safe distance, the stranger halted. "I feel fully restored," he said, "and will trespass no further on your kindness. But, should you ever be in want of a friend, come to this address and you will find one who is very willing to help you."

He took a card from its case, as he spoke, and handed it to Dick.

The young man held it up to the gaslight. "Philip Jocelyn," he read, with a start of surprise.

Then, turning to the strange gentleman, he said, eagerly:

"That is your name? You are Philip Jocelyn?"

"Yes."

Dick broke out in an exultant whoop. "Hooray!" he cried. "Nothing better could have happened. The Good Man himself must have brought us together this night."

"What do you mean?" asked Philip, for it was he who had been thus strangely encountered.

The ballet-girl answered his question.

"We were wanting to find you, sir," she said, almost breathless with joy, "and didn't know where to look."

"Why did you wish to find me?"

"You shall hear directly. But, in the first place, let me ask if you know a young lady called Mabel Trevor?"

At the sound of that name, Philip turned suddenly upon her and seized her arm in a vice-like grip.

"Mabel!" he exclaimed, "Good God! What have you to tell me of her?"

"Nothing, perhaps, or it may be very much."

"Speak out."

"Do you know where she is at this present moment?"

"No. She has been missing for several days. I have been nearly distracted because of the uncertainty of her fate. Night after night have I tramped the streets, hoping to gain some clue by which to trace her out, whether dead or alive."

"I saw her yesterday."

"Ah, heaven be praised!"

"She was under the same roof with myself."

"But where—where is she now?"

He wrung his hands wildly. Dick, who had been a silent spectator of the scene, could bear his evident distress no longer.

"Hang it, Jule," he interrupted, "why don't you tell the whole story at once? The girl must be Mr. Jocelyn's sweetheart. Don't keep him in suspense."

Thus exhorted, Julia, without any further hesitation, related all that had transpired, so far as she herself was acquainted with the particulars.

"I know this Gilbert Belmont," said Philip, at the conclusion of her recital, "know him for a base, bad man."

He spoke quite calmly, seeking to stifle the agony that stirred his soul. He felt strangely perplexed by the story to which he had just listened. He felt thoroughly convinced that Mrs. Laudersdale's tools had played her false in some manner; since it was not possible that she and Belmont were hand and glove to each other.

Honor among thieves! Pah! There is no such thing. Where interest ends, there, too, is an end to honor.

And so reasoned Philip Jocelyn.

He knew that a strange and most intricate game was being played.

Who held the winning cards? Time, alone, could answer that question.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GAMESTER'S LAIR.

PHILIP stood looking thoughtfully into Dick's face, for some minutes.

"My mind is relieved of one heavy burden," he resumed, after a long silence. "I know that Mabel lives. Belmont could not have had it in his thoughts to put her out of the way."

"No," said Dick, gravely. "Her life is safe in his hands. He would reserve her for a fate worse than death."

Philip shuddered.

"I shall not rest until the dear angel is found," he said, between his set teeth. "And if that villain has harmed one hair of her head, it shall go hard with him."

"Count me with you, sir."

Philip wrung the young man's hand.

"God bless you!" he cried, in a voice of strong emotion. "You can be of incalculable service to me, if you will; and Mabel must be found at whatever cost."

"Yes, yes."

Julia pressed nearer her companions.

"From what Belmont said to old Het," she interrupted, "I know he has a retreat of some sort outside the city, where he intended to take his captive."

"You do not know in which direction that retreat lies?"

"No more than that it is in Westchester county."

"We must and will find it."

A hurried consultation then ensued. It was finally decided that Philip and Dick should accompany Julia back to Slaughter-house Point, and then seek the gambling-hell in upper Broadway, which they well knew Belmont was in the habit of frequenting.

It would be possible, they thought, there to discover the exact location of the *roue's* country-house.

They left Julia within sight of old Het's establishment, and then hailed the first carriage that passed.

It was nearly midnight when they reached that modern hell in upper Broadway.

Philip was not in the habit of frequenting such places, but he had been in this particular house two or three times before.

However, he and Dick now entered the spacious apartment devoted to faro, with the careless, lounging air of men perfectly familiar with such places.

They found themselves in a brilliantly-lighted room, furnished in the most elaborate and costly manner. Paintings decorated the walls, and a soft velvet pile covered the floor.

There was the usual side-board, where liquors of the most excellent quality were freely offered to all comers.

Near the center of the apartment stood a massive table covered with green cloth, and around which a little group was gathered, at the moment our friends crossed the threshold, in anxious but silent expectancy.

Philip's eyes were roving over this group, half-absently, when Dick, of a sudden, caught his hand and pressed it significantly.

"Look," he whispered. "There's Belmont himself, as sure as I'm a sinner."

Philip turned quickly. There, indeed, stood the man he was wishing to find, near a roulette-wheel in one corner, listlessly, but by no means indifferently, surveying the scene.

His wandering gaze met Philip's at this instant. He gave a slight start, bowed somewhat awkwardly, hesitated a little, but finally approached.

As he did so, Dick leaned toward his companion, and whispered, hurriedly:

"You'd better be a little civil with that devil. Don't put him on his guard at the outset. If you do he may prove too much for us."

There was no time to reply, for Belmont now stood beside them.

"Well met," he said, holding out his hand to Philip. "Dissipating, eh?"

"A little," was the brief reply.

"Humph! You don't indulge in that way very frequently. How does it happen that you are here to-night?"

He looked keenly at Philip, with something like a leer in his bright, black eyes.

"A restless spirit that would not be exorcised led me in this direction, perhaps."

"You don't mean a troubled conscience?" sneered Philip.

"I mean nothing of the sort," Philip returned, with dignity.

"Pardon me. But why should Philip Jocelyn, the rich, the courted, the envied, be cursed with the spirit of restlessness?"

"Everybody has his share of troubles."

"Troubles?" echoed Belmont. "Ha, ha! I laugh at the word; and why shouldn't you! Come, come, this is the best place in the world to drown any thing of the sort."

"Or the worst," interpolated Philip.

"Humph! Let us not discuss that question, but rather leave it for philosophers to decide."

Philip noticed, even as he spoke, that the

gambler seemed absent-minded and at a loss. Did he know that he (Philip) was Mabel's friend, and suspect him of being secretly in quest of her?

The thought came into his mind, but he was at a loss to tell how Belmont should know aught of his interest in the young girl's fate—or even that he was aware of her existence.

"What say you to a social game of cards by ourselves?" said the gambler, after a pause, turning as if to lead the way to one of the smaller side-rooms.

"I never play," returned Philip. "I am here in the character of a spectator, merely."

"Ah, indeed," bowing, though with a sneer in his eyes. "Temperate, eh? Perhaps it is just as well, for I must soon be off, myself. I have a long ride before me, as yet, to-night."

He walked away when he had ceased to speak. Philip drew a long, deep breath. Where could Belmont be going at that late hour of the night, except to his house in the country, where, if Julia's story could be trusted, Mabel was to be found?

And if he was going there, he certainly could not suspect Philip of knowing that he had had any hand in the girl's disappearance; otherwise, he would not have spoken so carelessly.

The young man's heart beat fast and furiously. The instant Belmont's back was turned, he said to Dick, in a low, eager tone of voice:

"I believe we are on the right track. Go out this instant and secure a conveyance of some sort. If that devil goes to the place where he has hidden Mabel, you and I must go, too."

"That we will," said Dick, stoutly.

"Quick, quick. Secure a carriage at whatever cost, and then come back to the street entrance to wait for me."

"Yes, sir."

He was too late, however. While they were talking, Belmont had slowly made the circuit of the table, and approached the door. He halted on the threshold to throw a keen, half-distrustful look toward the spot where our hero and Dick were standing, then quitted the house.

"After him!" cried Philip, breathlessly. "I fear he is beginning to suspect something. If we lose sight of him for many consecutive minutes, we are lost."

They rushed from the house. When they reached the street, Belmont was nowhere to be seen. They ran for a little distance, first up and then down the street, but discovered no trace of him.

They were nearly ready to despair, when a close carriage suddenly emerged from one of the cross streets that intersect upper Broadway.

It passed close to one of the street lamps, and by the light thus afforded, both Philip and Dick saw the object of their search reclining among the crimson cushions of the carriage.

"There he is!" they cried, in concert.

Philip uttered a groan of despair. Even Dick Daredevil seemed to be at a loss for a minute or two, for there was no second carriage in sight, with which to follow the departing one.

At last Dick formed a sudden resolution.

"Trust in me," he said. "Leave me to manage this affair."

Before the words had fairly left his lips, he darted after the departing vehicle, with the fleetness of a deer.

Philip had the satisfaction of seeing him reach it, and leap up behind, where he seemed to cling with the tenacity of a leech.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LITTLE "SIDE" GAME.

We must go back a few hours in our story, and beg our readers to accompany us once again to Woodlawn.

It was mid-afternoon of the day on which Miles Duff had learned of Mabel's disappearance from Old Het's establishment, and shortly after he had paid that hurried visit to Bill Cuppings.

Mrs. Laudersdale was seated in her dressing-room, the composure of her beautiful face somewhat ruffled by troubled thoughts.

That paragon of maids, Jane Burt, was moving about the apartment in her usually quiet manner, deftly setting things to rights.

At last Mrs. Laudersdale stirred in her chair, and fixed her eyes half-entreatingly upon the demure little figure flitting here and there.

"Jane," she said, sharply.

The maid instantly dropped duster and brush, crossed to her mistress' side, and stood with her hands folded over her bosom.

"Madam?"

A faint tinge of color crept into Mrs. Laudersdale's pale face. "Jane," she said, shifting uneasily, "I want you to do me a favor."

"Yes, madam."

"See that the door is securely shut, and then return to me."

The girl obeyed. She was getting used to these confidences of her mistress, and did not feel very much surprised. Without a word, she took the chair to which Mrs. Laudersdale waved her.

"Now listen," said the woman. "I am going to deal very frankly with you, Jane. The time for disguises between you and me is long past."

"I should think it was," dryly.

"I'm going to trust you to the uttermost, Jane. And while I live, and am prosperous, you shall never want for money."

"You are very generous."

Mrs. Laudersdale sat nervously folding and unfolding her milk-white hands for a few minutes, looking very steadily, the while, at her companion.

"I have a little commission to be executed," she said, presently, "and choose to intrust it to you rather than to Bill Cuppings or anybody else."

"What is it?"

Mrs. Laudersdale glanced quickly round, and then bent her face nearer that of her maid.

"Jane," she whispered, "I need the services of two men, who will do my bidding and ask no questions."

"Humph. Such persons are easily found in the city of New York."

"Yes. But will you undertake to find them for me?"

Jane hesitated. "You must go into particulars more fully before I can answer that question," she said.

"You know where to put your hand on such men as I want?"

"Yes."

"Then I will make it for your interest to serve me. You are to manage the whole affair for yourself, and in your name, remember."

"You haven't told me what the affair is to be," said Jane, half sullenly.

"No; I was coming to that. Philip Jocelyn must be taken care of."

Jane started and caught her breath.

"What do you mean?" she cried, her face paling. "You are plotting to get rid of him just as you got rid of Mabel Trevor!"

Jane, as well as her mistress, be it remembered, had no suspicion but that Miles and Bill had carried out their instructions to the letter, and that our gentle heroine was sleeping the sleep from which there is no awakening in this world.

"No," said Mrs. Laudersdale, shuddering violently. "Oh, no, not that! Philip must not suffer the slightest harm. It is only necessary that his liberty should be restricted for a few weeks."

The eyes of the two women met. "What has Mr. Jocelyn done?" asked Jane.

"Nothing."

"Why, then, do you wish to deprive him of his liberty?"

"To put it out of his power to harm me."

"Humph."

"When you take a dangerous step, Jane," said Mrs. Laudersdale, thoughtfully, "there is nothing like looking out for breakers from the beginning. Had you lived such an eventful life as mine has been, you would see the full force of my remark."

"No doubt."

"You would indeed. Now Philip Jocelyn is likely to prove a dangerous obstacle in my way, and as such must be removed."

"I thought you intended to marry Miss Marcia to him."

The wicked woman bit her lip. She did not like the lurking sarcasm in Jane's words and tone.

"It does not matter what my intentions were," she said, hastily. "Circumstances alter cases, you know. Serious consequences are likely to result unless some restraint is placed on Philip's liberty."

"And yet you say he has done nothing."

"I wouldn't be able to say it long, though, if matters were suffered to go on. He knows much, and suspects a good deal more. My eyes have been on him, of late. He is hunting high and low for that girl, Mabel. He will make some disagreeable discoveries if permitted to proceed with his quest."

"Ah, I see—I see."

He ought to be shut up, somewhere, and kept confined for several weeks, until all danger of discovery is over."

Jane, the demure—Jane, the motionless—smiled very quietly to herself.

"Wouldn't he suspect, at once, who had deprived him of his liberty, and for what purpose?" she asked.

"Why should he? Even if he should have the shadow of a suspicion, it would seem too monstrous to receive a moment's credence. Besides, before he was set at liberty, I should shut up the house here and be off to Europe with Mr. Laudersdale."

"And Marcia?" suggested Jane.

"Oh, she would remain behind, with some one of her friends, to condole with Philip because of his mysterious incarceration, and to bring him sighing at her feet again."

"Humph. A very clever plot, madame."

"So I flatter myself."

"In fact a little too clever to succeed."

"That remains to be seen."

Jane smiled again, in a more meaningless manner than ever. "Whether it succeeds or fails," she said, after a slight pause, "you can safely count on my help."

Mrs. Laudersdale began gently to smooth her maid's lusterless hair in a half-caressing manner.

"You're a good girl, Jane," she said. "It will be well for you if we remain such faithful friends till the end of the chapter."

"I know that."

"The sooner Philip Jocelyn's operations are stopped, the better it will be for us. We must find such men as we need this very day."

"Yes, madame."

"I will go to New York with you, Jane. You can be ready in an hour from this."

"Yes, madame."

"Good. Take out my black silk and plainest hat, and lay them on the bed. There, now you may go to make your own toilet."

At the end of an hour mistress and maid had set out on their mission.

CHAPTER XX.

MILES DUFF, AGAIN.

IMMEDIATELY on crossing to the New York side of the river, Mrs. Laudersdale secured a cab.

"Where do you wish to be taken?" she said to Jane, in a whisper.

"To the Bowery."

"Ah! I'd better stop cabby two or three squares on this side. You can walk that distance."

"Oh, yes."

"Very good. Of course it would not be well for me to accompany you all the way. I can wait for you at any point you may name."

"It does not matter where you stop, so long as the distance is not very considerable."

Mrs. Laudersdale now gave the cabman his directions, and she and Jane took their places in the carriage.

"Make your own terms with the men you employ," the mistress said, as they rattled through the streets. "Keep a sharp eye to my interests in every way—that is all."

"Of course. But where are the men to confine Mr. Jocelyn, if they once succeed in getting him in their power?"

"That is their concern."

"You mean that they are to suit themselves as to the place?"

"Exactly. Only it must be secure, and retired."

"Yes, to be sure."

"And," resumed Mrs. Laudersdale, in a very energetic tone of voice, "take care to impress on the minds of the ruffians that they are not to harm one hair of Philip Jocelyn's head. If they do, they will be held accountable."

"Yes, yes."

The cab soon reached the spot where its driver had been directed to stop. Here Jane Burt hurried from the carriage, and almost immediately was lost to sight in the direction of the Bowery.

While waiting for her return, Mrs. Laudersdale reclined among the cushions, and, though not without an anxious and troubled look upon her face, idly watched the passers-by.

She was drearily wondering how all this plotting and artifice was likely to end; wondering, too, if Lucretia Borgia and Catharine de Medici, in the moment when their guilty and wicked schemes seemed most sure of accomplishment, felt one-half so wretched and heart-sick as she felt at that moment.

Suddenly, in the midst of their cogitations, an ugly face, bristling with mingled cunning and ferocity, was thrust in at the carriage door.

"Well met!" said a cool, malicious voice.

Mrs. Laudersdale started up with a stifled shriek. "Richard, is it you?"

Then she dropped into her seat again, pale and trembling.

"Hush!" said the man, grinning from ear to ear. "Call me Miles, if you please; the other name is, or at least ought to be, tabooed between us."

The intruder was none other than the clever villain we have known as Miles Duff.

The wretched woman's agitation on seeing Miles leering at her from the carriage door was excessive; but she had soon succeeded in controlling it.

"What do you want?" she asked, sharply. "Tell me in two words, and then go away."

He looked at her with a furtive gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Afraid of being seen in my company, eh?" he said, insolently. "Can't help that, my lady. What I've got to say can't be told in two words, or even in a dozen."

"Then tell the coachman to drive up and down the street two or three times; and do you come into the carriage."

She spoke in a very faint tone of voice. This meeting with Miles was anything but pleasant to her; and yet she knew no way to shake him off. The hold he had upon her was far too terrible in its nature.

He followed her directions, and in another minute was seated by her side, and the carriage was moving slowly up the street.

Mrs. Laudersdale pulled down the blinds, and then looked fixedly at the unwelcome intruder.

"What is your business with me?" she asked. "I want your help."

"My help?" she repeated.

"I beg pardon—your money."

"That is more like it," speaking in a low, bitter tone of voice. "I can commend your little game. You have found me, Richard, and now intend to bleed me freely."

"Perhaps. But, before we go any further, let me again suggest that you make use of my present name, Miles, in addressing me."

"Very well," she said. "I have known you under so many aliases, that one name sounds almost as familiar as another."

"No doubt."

This coolness irritated her. "What has become of the money I gave you only a few days since?" she asked, abruptly.

"For ducking pretty Miss Mabel in the river? Pah! You couldn't expect that paltry amount to last forever."

"Perhaps you will get no more from me."

Miles wrinkled his bristling brows, and an angry fire darted from his eyes.

"Oh, yes I shall," he said, insolently. "You'll give me all I ask for."

"Good heavens! have you come back but to ruin me, Miles—to make me your slave?"

"You are not my slave, Martha, but something far better than that, in my way of thinking."

"What?"

"My banker!"

Mrs. Laudersdale started, and bit hard at her thin under lip. If glances had power to slay, Miles would not have survived the one she lent upon him at that instant.

Her emotion was gone with magical suddenness, however. It would not answer to let this ruffian know how much she feared and hated him. He was already sufficiently conscious of his power.

"What amount do you demand of me at the present time?" she asked, after a moment's reflection.

"Only fifty dollars. You see I am very moderate, considering that every penny—"

"Peace!" she interrupted, angrily. "Haven't you a single grain of prudence?"

"Prudence be hanged! I want the money, and must have it."

"When?"

"To-day—this very hour."

The wretched woman groaned. "I need every dollar that I have with me, Miles."

"Can't help that," he said, sullenly. "My needs are quite as pressing as yours."

She reluctantly counted out fifty dollars from her purse. This money had been intended for the ruffians whose services Jane had set out to engage. But, as Miles knew only too well, she dared refuse him nothing.

"Would that it were to purchase a rope with which to hang yourself!" she thought, as she laid the crisp bills across his palm.

The clever villain must have read what was passing in her mind, for a malicious smile hovered for an instant round his mouth.

"Don't think you are rid of me," he said, very, very quietly. "You never will be rid of me while you have a penny that you can call your own."

Mrs. Laudersdale's cheek flushed crimson, but she said nothing.

"Wasn't it fortunate that I ran across you at Woodlawn, the other day?" he went on, jeeringly. "I was never a believer in special providences; but I now believe in them. I hadn't seen you for a good many years, Martha, until we met that day. I didn't know whether you were dead or living."

She caught her breath with a sharp gasp.

"You will not betray me?" she cried. "Oh, Miles, you will not betray me?"

"Humph! Do you think me such a fool as to harm the goose that lays my golden eggs?"

"As I promised once before, it shall be made to your interest to keep our secret."

"It had better be."

"I will give you all the money I can spare."

"I shall always know where to call upon you."

She shuddered, and a deadly glitter came into those bright black orbs of hers. But she immediately concealed it by dropping the fringed lids.

"Let us be the best of friends, Miles," she said, laying her white, bejeweled hand over his hard and rough one. "The past shall be as a sealed book to us. We will live only in the present, and do all that we can to aid and abet each other; now, will we not?"

"Of course," he answered, sullenly. "So long as you are true to me and do the generous thing, I shan't peach. But if you attempt any treachery—"

He ended the sentence with a clenching of his fist and a grinding of his teeth that were more expressive than any words could have been.

Mrs. Laudersdale's cheeks paled again, but she sat in reflective silence for some minutes.

"Miles," she said, presently, "before we part, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Humph! What is it?"

"There's a gentleman in this city known as Gilbert Belmont. I want you to learn all you can about him—where he lives, the amount of his wealth, and the sort of parentage from which he has sprung. Will you?"

Miles looked just a little puzzled, and nodded quite graciously for him.

"It will be a comparatively easy matter for you to find the man to whom I have reference."

"Yes."

"Then bring me the earliest information you are able to obtain."

"I will do so."

"Now, have you anything further to say to me? If not, you shall be set down at the next crossing."

"I have nothing further to say."

Mrs. Laudersdale breathed a sigh of relief. She felt that it was time to return to the spot where Jane would expect to meet her, and she did not care that Miles should know aught of the girl's mission.

When the rough quitted the carriage, she watched his retreating figure until it was lost to view in one of the numerous side streets.

"It was a good idea to put him on Belmont's track," she muttered, reflectively. "In the first place, it will keep him busy for a few days; he will have less occasion for watching me. Again, Belmont may prove the right sort of catch for Marcia, after all, should Jocelyn fight shy of her."

Mrs. Laudersdale, it will be seen, did not hesitate to use vulgarisms when communing with herself, whatever she may have done when her "society" manners were put on.

When she reached the spot where Jane was to meet her, she found that demure little body standing in front of a shop window, apparently engaged in an admiring contemplation of the wares displayed within.

She turned, however, the instant the carriage stopped, and quickly took her place by her mistress' side.

"I had been waiting some minutes," she said, "and was afraid you had left me."

"You ought to have known better."

Then, looking eagerly into Jane's eyes, she asked:

"Did you succeed?"

"Yes," said Jane, placidly. "I happened to run upon two men who know Jocelyn perfectly well by sight."

"You think they are to be trusted?"

"Of course. They are old friends of mine."

Mrs. Laudersdale stared, and a quiet smile played about the thin lips of the maid.

"Friends, Jane?" she repeated. Then, biting her lip, she asked, abruptly: "When will they do their work?"

"This very night, if possible."

"Good. You are a jewel, Jane."

Our readers are already aware of the attack

that was made upon Philip Jocelyn, that night, and the providential manner in which aid reached him in time to baffle the two scoundrels.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WILD RIDE.

DICK DAREDEVIL, clinging desperately to the springs of the carriage that was bearing Gilbert Belmont away from the gambling hell, after considerable effort managed to crawl a little higher up, and was enabled to grasp hold of the straps, to which he clung as if for dear life.

"This isn't the pleasantest position imaginable," he muttered, with a grimace, as a sudden lurch of the carriage brought his head violently in contact with the wooden back. "But I guess I can stand it for the time being. Julia sent me to look for the strange girl, and for her sake I'd be willing to have the breath knocked out of my body a dozen times over."

The poor dancing-girl had one true friend, it would appear.

After what seemed an age to Dick, crouching upon his uncomfortable seat, the carriage left the city sights and sounds behind, and entered a winding country road.

"I'm sure that Jocelyn was right," Dick said to himself, when he remarked this fact. "Belmont is going straight to the country-house where this Mabel Trevor is detained as his prisoner."

As the intrepid fellow sat with both ears open to their fullest extent, at length he heard a slight—a very slight tapping on what seemed to be the glass front of the carriage.

This sound was repeated. Then a subdued voice from within the carriage asked, anxiously:

"What's the trouble, James?"

The speaker was evidently Belmont himself.

"Hush, master," whispered another voice, this last coming from the driver's box. "I want to tell you that there's a man clinging to the back of the carriage."

"Damnation!" Then, after a slight pause, Belmont went on to ask:

"When did the fellow get up?"

"Within three minutes from the time when we started. I didn't say anything before, because I thought he would drop off ere this."

"Give him a taste of your whip."

"All right."

Every word of this conversation, though carried on in a half-whisper, and while the carriage was still in motion, had reached Dick's wonderfully acute ears. He had barely time to prepare himself for such a demonstration, when the driver's lash cut the air within three inches of his nose.

"Who's that?" he growled, with a drunken hiccough, taking his cue instantly. "Can't—can't—hic—you let a feller alone?"

"Why are you perched up there?" asked the driver, angrily.

"We won't go home—hic—till mornin'; no, we won't go home till mornin'," sung Dick, in a maudlin tone of voice.

"Humph. Drive on, James," said Belmont's sharp voice. "It's only some drunken fellow. He'll tumble into the mud before we've gone much further."

The driver muttered something about that it was "a new thing for drunken fellows to be clinging to straps a sober man could hardly hold on by." But he whipped up his horses.

Another mile had been traversed, and then Belmont called for James to stop.

"Are we nearly there?" he asked.

"Yes," was the sullen answer.

"Then look to that drunken brute. He mustn't be suffered to go any further with us. If he hasn't tumbled off, why, push him off."

The driver dismounted from his box. But Dick was even quicker than he, for he slid noiselessly down from behind, and ere James could approach near enough to see, had crept into the shadow of some bushes by the wayside.

"There's nobody here," the man reported to his master.

"Good," said Belmont. "Now drive straight up to the house, and as fast as possible. We are confounded late to-night."

As James passed the carriage-door on his way back to the box, it was pushed quickly open, and half a dozen hurried words were passed between master and man.

These words were uttered in so low a tone that Dick was unable to catch them.

The instant the carriage started onward again, he darted forth from his hiding-place, and resumed his position behind.

"I'd give my right hand to know what them devils were whispering about," he muttered, somewhat uneasily, as the horses were turned

by their driver into what seemed to be a narrow and neglected road.

He was destined to know much sooner than he anticipated.

Thick bushes shut in the road on either hand; but James must have been very familiar with the road, for, despite every obstacle, the carriage dashed on at a spanking pace.

After the lapse of about fifteen minutes, it was suddenly drawn up in a large and gloomy yard.

"Here we are," cried Belmont; and he prepared to alight.

As for Dick, he glanced sharply about him, that chill foreboding of evil throbbing more painfully than ever at his heart. What he saw was a dark, low house, half-hidden in forest-trees, and presenting an aspect strangely desolate and forbidding.

Of course he could see nothing very distinctly, having only the faint starlight to aid his vision. But the deep silence that pervaded everywhere was enough of itself to have appalled the bravest heart.

He did not hesitate for one moment, however, but dropped from his precarious perch, and threw himself, at full length, in the rank grass until Belmont had passed him by.

"Secure the horses, James, and come in at once," the gambler called out, "after having advanced five or six paces. You can call up Pete, and send him out to groom them."

"Yes, sir," said James; and his voice seemed husky to Dick, as if he were trying to repress a laugh.

Nevertheless, the intrepid young ballet-dancer followed Belmont to the house, only waiting for the latter to put a safe distance between them ere he himself set out.

Let the risks be what they may, he was determined to find out whether Mabel Trevor was in that house or not.

James was still busy with the horses, and so, for the present, Dick had only the gambler himself against whom to be on his guard.

He stole noiselessly up a grass-grown path, and mounted two or three rickety steps that led to a porch.

Not a sound smote upon his ears, save the soft sighing of the wind among the tree-tops.

The house-door was right before him, and to his joy he saw that it was standing wide open.

The passage within was pitch-dark, and looked gloomy as the mouth of Erebus.

He knew that Gilbert Belmont had gone in at that door. After a moment's hesitation he determined to follow him, and trust to Providence to guide his steps aright.

He crossed the threshold, and put out both hands to grope his way along the passage. Ere he had advanced a single yard, however, some heavy object was brought down with resounding force on his head and shoulders.

He staggered, and fell like a log on the floor.

At the same instant a shrill yell of triumph reached his ears, and Belmont's dark figure darted past him, and out at the door.

A moment later, the carriage could be heard dashing down the lonely road.

Dick's senses had not been utterly knocked out of him. He realized enough of what was transpiring to know that he had been outwitted—played with from first to last—and that Belmont was escaping him.

But he was too dizzy and weak to attempt pursuit.

He lay very still, just as he had fallen. At least two hours wore on, and daylight would soon appear. Suddenly, to Dick's infinite surprise, he heard a fresh rumble of wheels, and a second carriage soon rolled into the yard.

It could scarcely be Belmont returning, for why should he return at all? Who, then, was it who had found it necessary to take a night's journey to this lonely spot? The house must be wholly deserted, for Dick had not heard or seen any indication of human presence during the two long hours in which he had been recovering from the blow he had received.

His curiosity was thoroughly awakened, and he crept into a deserted dog-kennel, near the stoop, from which he hoped to watch events undiscovered.

He had scarcely ensconced himself in this singular refuge, when he saw two men leap from the carriage and approach the house, bearing the motionless body of a third between them.

CHAPTER XXII.

MABEL AND BELMONT.

It will be remembered that, on leaving Old Het's establishment at Slaughter-house Point,

the hapless girl had been pounced upon by some unknown foe, and borne to a carriage that stood in waiting.

The action was so sudden, so utterly unexpected, that Mabel could not offer the slightest resistance.

Besides, the muffling cloak which had been thrown over her head in the first instance, would have stifled her cries; in fact it answered so well the purpose for which it was intended that she was half-suffocated when her captor saw fit to remove it.

This was not until the carriage began to roll away at a speed that must have defied pursuit.

The instant she was released the poor girl gasped faintly, and fell backward among the cushions. Consciousness had left her.

"Good," muttered Belmont. "Now I'm not likely to be troubled with the shriekings of my beauty until we are clear of the city."

He reached forward and touched the passive face of the girl; then drew back, and went on.

"Old Het thought me wholly ignorant of the true history of this inanimate Hebe. Well, I don't know much about her. But, if she isn't the same girl I saw in the carriage that drove away from Woodlawn the other night, then I am very much mistaken. But it isn't best to tell all you know on every possible occasion. Besides, I'm not at all deeply exercised in regard to her past. She's lovely as an Hour, let her be who and what she will.

The carriage was now in the suburbs of the city, and Belmont let down the front window to speak to the driver.

"James," he said, "I suppose you understand the programme?"

"Perfectly, sir," responded the servant.

"You are to drive directly to Hedge House?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can't you stop a minute and light the carriage-lamps? It's dark as a pocket in here."

"I think it will be safe to do so now."

In another minute he had them brightly burning, sending red flashes of light into the carriage and over the motionless figure of poor Mabel.

Then up went the glass, and Belmont was free to contemplate at his ease the marvelous beauty of his captive.

At last she moved, heaved a deep sigh, unclosed her eyes and fixed them in a wild, startled look upon the face of her companion.

"Where am I?" she asked, faintly.

"With one who is bound to protect you with his life," was Belmont's ready answer.

Her searching gaze relaxed not in its intensity when these words were spoken. A low cry fell from her lips. She suddenly remembered what had happened—how she had been escaping from Het Bender's cruel clutches when she had been seized and forced into this carriage.

"God help me," she murmured.

Belmont gently took her hand. "Do not fear, sweet lady," said the artful scoundrel. "I am your friend. You shall never be taken back to the wretched hole from which you have just escaped."

She still looked distrustful and frightened.

"Where are you taking me, sir?"

"To a place of safety."

"I wish to go back to Woodlawn. Oh! for mercy's sake, take me there," she pleaded.

Belmont lowered the lids of his eyes to conceal the gleam of pleasure that came into those tell-tale orbs at these words. They revived his suspicion in regard to Mabel's identity.

There was an opportunity not to be neglected of knowing more of her. If he knew exactly who were her friends, he could the better guard against them.

"Are you sure—quite sure," he said, insinuatingly, "that it would be safe for you to return to Woodlawn?"

"It would be safe," replied the unsuspecting girl, "if I could only see Mr. Laudersdale himself. He would protect me. I should go directly to him, and tell him all my story, and how friendless I am."

"You think you have some claim upon him?"

"Yes; but I know not of what nature."

"He is a relative, perhaps?"

For answer, Mabel briefly recounted what had been told to her by Granny Wells in the old hut in Berlin.

Belmont listened with a show of interest that was not wholly put on. He began to realize that he had secured a richer prize than he had, at first, imagined.

"Mrs. Laudersdale, if I mistake not, is your greatest enemy," he said, after a minute's reflective silence.

"Yes; Mrs. Laudersdale and the two ruffians who took me to Old Het's house."

"Have you no friends?"

"Only one," she answered, blushing.

"Who is he?"

"Philip Jocelyn."

After what he had witnessed at the garden gate that night at Woodlawn, Belmont was partially prepared for this answer; but he could not repress a start, and a frown of displeasure.

"I would not advise you to trust too implicitly in Philip Jocelyn's friendship," he said, gruffly.

The tone in which these words were uttered awakened Mabel from her dream of fancied security. She looked wildly and imploringly into the dark face of her companion.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Are you truly my friend?"

"Have I not said so?"

"Yes; and I wish I might believe you."

"You may," he said, smiling now.

"You are a stranger to me; I have never seen you before to-night."

"But I have seen you, sweet lady."

"When? where?"

"This very day—in the chamber of which Old Het made you an enforced inmate."

He smiled again, in a manner that caused Mabel's heart to throb fast with fear.

"How could that be, sir? How could you have visited my room, and I know nothing of it?"

"You were fast asleep at the time."

She crimsoned to her temples. This was the first intimation she had received of the privacy of her apartment having been invaded.

"Then Old Het must have let you in."

"She did."

"For what purpose?"

"She had spoken of you to me, and wished me to see for myself what a beauty you are."

A sharp cry broke from Mabel's lips. She began vaguely to comprehend the plot of which she had been the victim, though she could not understand the necessity of all this treachery and secrecy on Old Het's part.

"Betrayed!" she moaned, covering her face with both hands. "That wicked woman intended to drop the key with which I let myself out. It was all a plot. I have escaped one snare but to fall into another."

"So it would appear," said Belmont, coolly.

She suddenly threw herself at his feet.

"For God's sake, let me go," she pleaded.

"What possible object can you have in detaining me? Oh! let me go free."

"Sweet Mabel, I am not self-sacrificing enough to do that."

She stared at him wildly. "I do not understand you," she cried.

"Let me explain," and he glowered upon her in cruel triumph. "I love you, and can not deprive myself of the joy of your presence."

"You—love—me?" she repeated, speaking the words in a slow, bewildered way. "It is a lie," and she sprung suddenly to her feet. "Do not profane that holy word with your unholy lips. I despise you for such bravado. And now, sir, I command you to stop this carriage, and let me get out."

Belmont laughed aloud at this sudden rebellion on the part of his captive—a hard, cruel laugh.

"Compose yourself, my beauty," he said, quietly. "It's my will, and not yours, that must be obeyed in the present state of affairs; and I decidedly object to parting company with you."

"Let me go. Oh! let me go!" sobbed Mabel, her courage utterly giving way again.

"Couldn't think of it, my dear. And it's wholly useless for you to struggle. Even though you scream for help, nobody will hear your cries. We have left the city behind, and are now in the open country."

Mabel glued her face to the window, and looked out. His words were true—too true. She wondered, now, that she could so long have remained oblivious to this fact.

In the apathy of a great despair, she dropped white and motionless into her seat again.

For some minutes Gilbert Belmont watched her silently from out the corners of his bright, dark eyes.

"Listen to me," he said, at last. "You had better resign yourself to the inevitable, like a sensible person. This seems a strange kind of wooing, but circumstances compel me to adopt it. Were you free to choose, you would laugh my pleadings to scorn, and smile only on Philip Jocelyn. But you are not free to choose. I have determined to make you my wife, and my wife you shall be, in spite of man or devil."

The man was more than half in earnest. His ambitious schemes, in part, had led him to make love to Marcia Denvil on several occasions—one of which is well known to the reader.

Since listening to a portion of our heroine's history, he had begun to doubt if those same schemes would not be more successfully realized if he made Mabel herself his wife.

Hence this sudden change in his intentions.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HEDGE HALL.

Poor Mabel remained silent and almost motionless. Her mind was filled with a thousand evil forebodings.

She did not believe he had the slightest wish or intention of making her his wife. But she wronged the clever villain. Whatever may have been his intentions in the first place, his purposes evidently had undergone a change.

That she was in some manner allied to a family of influence and high standing was evident, as Mrs. Laudersdale would never have taken such desperate steps to get rid of her. To wed the beautiful girl might not be a bad move, since then he could the more readily sift to the bottom the mystery of her relations with Mr. Laudersdale, if, as he guessed, she was related to him. Should it prove that she was not a born heiress, he could readily shake her off when she was likely to become troublesome.

While these thoughts were coursing through his active brain, the carriage rolled on through the darkness at a speed which spoke well for the quality of the horse-flesh.

Presently it passed through a gate and was pulled up before a large but gloomy-looking house, surrounded by a high hedge.

Belmont leaped to the ground, and then helped Mabel to alight.

"Let me welcome you to Hedge House," he said, airily.

The poor girl shuddered as her hand touched his, but she submissively yielded herself to his guidance.

"Sweet bird," he chuckled, hurrying her toward the house, "you will soon be safe in the nest I have provided for you—safe from Mother Het and all her crew."

He rung the bell, and after waiting at least five minutes, was gratified by the appearance of a middle-aged woman, quite prepossessing in appearance, who crossed the hall with a light in her hand, and unlocked the door.

"Is it you, Gilbert?" she asked, starting back with a gesture of unfeigned surprise.

"Of course it is."

"I did not know that you were coming home to-night."

"Humph! Stand aside, Mrs. Pratt. Don't you observe that I have brought back a guest with me?"

"Yes, yes," the woman said, hastily.

"You are to take very good care of her, Mrs. Pratt. In fact, she is to have the best, and the *securer* room in the house."

Belmont laid a peculiar emphasis on his concluding words.

"Ah, ha! I understand. Every thing shall be as you wish."

Mrs. Pratt leaned forward as she made this remark, and peered curiously into Mabel's face, by the light of the lamp she carried.

"Lord love me!" she cried, sharply. "Who are you?"

"Her name is Mabel Trevor," replied Belmont.

Mrs. Pratt looked bewildered. "I've seen that face before," she said, thoughtfully. Then a sudden exclamation broke from her lips:

"Good heavens! I know now of whom it reminds me."

Belmont felt pleased, but tried hard not to betray his pleasure. "Hush!" he said, sternly. "Have done with such nonsense. Take the girl to her room. You know which one?"

"The blue chamber, I suppose?"

"Yes. Now be off. And see that you lock the door securely. I wouldn't like to wake up in the morning to find that my bird had flown."

"Trust me to look after her," responded the woman.

She took hold of Mabel's hand and led the unresisting girl up a flight of stairs to a large, luxuriously-furnished chamber known as the "blue" room, from the prevailing color of its adornments.

Before returning, Mrs. Pratt had taken the precaution to assure herself that the windows were securely fastened, and that no possible means of escape could be contrived.

The remainder of the night passed without event of any sort.

Breakfast was always a very late meal at Hedge House. Just as the ornate clock on the mantel of the breakfast-room was on the stroke of eleven the next morning, Belmont came yawning down-stairs.

Mrs. Pratt sat at the head of the table, waiting for him.

"Have you seen our gentle captive this morning?" was his first question.

"Yes. I looked in at her about an hour since."

Belmont laughed lightly.

"Is she becoming reconciled to her new quarters, think you?"

"No," slowly shaking her head. "She'll never be that, Gilbert. She is very different from those other persons you have brought here, from time to time."

"Humph! I should think so."

"I'm sure she didn't close her eyes last night. She was sitting by the window when I looked in, the picture of despair."

Belmont shrugged his shoulders. Then, after a minute's silence, he looked eagerly across the table at his housekeeper.

"Mrs. Pratt," he said, "who is that girl?"

The woman started. "What girl?" she repeated, her glance shifting uneasily from the table to her master's face, and back again.

"Don't pretend to misunderstand me. I mean our lovely prisoner."

"You ought to know much more about her than I can tell you."

"I don't. You recognized her last night."

Mrs. Pratt shook her head.

"I only noticed a resemblance to some person with whom I was acquainted at one time."

"To whom?"

"That person is dead."

"To whom?" repeated Belmont, dashing his hand angrily upon the table.

The woman turned pale, but she dared not refuse to answer him.

"The first Mrs. Laudersdale!"

"Ah, ha!" Belmont started; his black eyes sparkled. "And so my dainty Mabel resembles the first Mrs. Laudersdale?" she said, after a long silence.

"Strikingly."

"How do you know?"

Mrs. Pratt hesitated, and seemed more reluctant to reply to this question than to any that had preceded. "I lived with the first Mrs. Laudersdale as nurse-maid," she answered, finally.

"Indeed!" Belmont rubbed his hands together, and smiled slyly to himself.

The sudden determination to which he had come the night before, while sitting in the carriage with Mabel and listening to her pathetic story, had been unexpectedly strengthened by the few words Mrs. Pratt had let fall.

"You must treat pretty Mabel as though she were of royal blood," he said, presently.

"Of course."

"Keep her a close prisoner, but see that she wants for nothing."

"Yes."

He rose and unlocked an escritoire that stood in one corner of the apartment, then took from a secret drawer a small casket of jewels.

"What do you think of these?" he said, throwing open a casket as he again approached the table.

Mrs. Pratt threw up both hands.

"Diamonds—real diamonds!" she cried.

"Of course they are diamonds."

"I never saw such beauties."

"They are unusually fine. Present them to Miss Trevor with my compliments, when you take up her breakfast."

Mrs. Pratt drew back, staring at him in dismay. "Surely, Gilbert," she ventured, "you don't mean what you say? You won't be so foolish as to make the girl so costly a present?"

"How dare you meddle in my affairs?" cried Belmont, angrily. "By what right do you pretend to dictate?"

She bit her lip. "I may have a right of which you little guess, Gilbert."

"Eh?" He fixed his bright black eyes on her face in a stare of genuine amazement. "What do you mean, woman?"

"Nothing, nothing."

She turned away her face to hide the strange pallor that had crept into it. But the thin hand that rested upon the table shook like a leaf.

"Never mind," said Belmont, in a gentler tone of voice. "I'm off now. Be sure that you execute my commission, Mrs. Pratt."

"Yes, sir."

"Say to Mabel that business calls me to the city this morning. But I hope to be able to pay my addresses to her to-morrow."

"Yes, sir."

He approached the door and then looked back, with his hand on the knob.

"Treat the girl well, Mrs. Pratt," were his last words; "for I'm dead in earnest, now, and intend to make her my wife."

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE SNARE.

WHERE, meanwhile, was Philip Jocelyn?

When the carriage in which Belmont was so carelessly reclining, and to the back of which Dick Daredevil clung with such desperate energy, dashed away from upper Broadway, Philip was left standing on the pavement, the picture of despair.

Philip struck his brow wildly with his clenched fist, as he stood, helpless and alone, only a few yards distant from the gambling hell he had just deserted.

"Oh, my God!" he muttered, "am I to be baffled now?"

He had very little faith in Dick's unaided efforts. It seemed to him that the young man would not have sufficient inducement to persist in the search when there was no one to spur him on. Even though he should follow the carriage to some distance, he was almost sure to let the clue slip through his fingers at last.

He did not know the dogged tenacity with which the young man was capable of adhering to an object which he had once undertaken.

"What can I do?" moaned Philip. "Alas, what can I do? Belmont must be going straight to the country-house where he has secreted Mabel, and I am powerless to follow him. If Dick loses sight of him all is lost."

Once again he looked wildly up and down the street. Not a solitary carriage or conveyance of any sort was in sight.

It was too late at night, or rather too early in the morning, for many people to be abroad.

He finally decided to remain where he was until morning, that Dick might be able to find him without difficulty, should he return from his wild goose chase.

He buttoned his coat to the chin, for the summer night air was cool, and leaned in a dejected attitude against the nearest lamp-post.

Though the young man knew it not, unfriendly eyes were upon him, watching his every movement.

After the lapse of at least an hour, two men approached from the deep shadow of the nearest by-street.

"Is your name Philip Jocelyn?" asked one of them, as he reached the spot where our hero was standing.

"It is," replied Philip, rousing himself from the reverie into which he had fallen.

"Then you are wanted."

"By whom?"

"The young fellow who was with you not so very long since," was the ready answer. "The same what rode away a-clingin' to that carriage."

Philip uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Where is he? And did he send you to find me?"

"In course he did."

"Where is he?" repeated our hero, eagerly.

"Just down that street," pointing to the one from which they had just emerged. "Come right along, sir."

Philip hesitated, and glanced sharply at the two men. Something in their appearance reminded him strongly of the two ruffians who had attacked him earlier in the evening.

And yet they could not be the same. Their dress was different; they could scarcely have kept him in sight all this while. Besides, had they not come directly from Dick?

"Come, sir," repeated the man, in slightly impatient accents. "There ain't any time to be wasted here. Besides, it's only a step."

Philip no longer hesitated. He suffered the two men to conduct him down the shady by-street.

He had proceeded but a very short distance, however, when he observed a close carriage drawn up to one side where the shadows were deepest.

"Who's there?" he asked, sharply.

The answer was a brutal laugh. He turned at the ominous sound, a suspicion of treachery again flashing upon his mind. Ere he could spring clear of his guides, however, a sudden blow from behind laid him sprawling upon the pavement.

"It had to be done, Ben," said the man who had acted as spokesman from the first.

"In course," muttered the second ruffian.

"But it's contrary to orders."

"Yes. He might have given us trouble again, though. He was beginnin' to suspect us."

"I know it. Lift him up, Steve. I hope you hain't let daylight through him."

"No fear o' that."

They raised Philip's inanimate form between them, bore him to the carriage, and thrust him into it.

"There's a movement about the heart," muttered Ben, leaning over him, as he lay helpless among the cushions. "He ain't dead."

"No. Now the sooner we are off, the better."

Steve jumped into the carriage, and Ben mounted to the box.

In another minute they were dashing down the street.

Philip's momentary fears had not played him false. These were the same ruffians, though in different disguises, who had assaulted him in the first instance.

They had never, both at a time, lost sight of him, save during the few minutes when he was in the faro house.

They had taken that opportunity to change their dress, and procure the carriage, or rather bring up the carriage from another street, where it had been waiting all along, in expectation of some such emergency.

Nothing of what had transpired had been lost on the clever rogues. And, like wise men, they took their cue from what they had witnessed.

The carriage was driven past Central Park, and so over toward Harlem.

Nearly an hour elapsed, and they were already above Yorkville, when Philip heaved a deep sigh and betrayed signs of returning animation.

"The young fellow mustn't come to his senses just yet," muttered Steve, on whom none of these indications were lost.

Leaning over his helpless victim, he held a handkerchief exhaling some powerful narcotic or other to his nostrils, and kept it there for a single instant.

He had the satisfaction of seeing Philip sink into a state of complete insensibility once more.

The carriage rolled on rapidly through the darkness of the night. The road into which they had struck became more and more lonely. Presently it seemed little else than a rude cart-track, overgrown with weeds.

At last the vehicle stopped before a long, low building, from the windows of which came not even a solitary gleam of light.

Both ruffians now leaped to the ground. Philip's senseless figure was lifted out, and borne between them into the house.

In gaining the door, of course they were compelled to pass the dog-kennel, in which, as already described, Dick Daredevil had taken refuge.

The instant they had crossed the threshold, the two ruffians laid their charge on the floor of the passage.

"Wait a minute," said Ben. "This is a confoundedly gloomy hole, and I'm not goin' a step further in the dark."

He struck a match and lighted a dark lantern he had brought along, hidden in the folds of his cloak.

The instant its glow had illuminated the passage, Dick Daredevil crawled out of the kennel and peeped in at the open door.

"Lord love me!" he cried, as his glance fell upon the prostrate figure on the floor. "If it ain't Jocelyn himself that the villains have nabbed! And unless I'm very much mistaken, they are the same covies who set upon him in the alley. What are they going to do with the gentleman, I wonder?"

It was necessary to wait and see. So he drew back far enough to escape the observation of the two men, and waited.

There was a brief delay. Then Philip was lifted as before, and borne down a flight of very steep stairs that descended from the end of the passage.

They found themselves in a moldy, vault-like place, from which a single apartment seemed to have been partitioned.

Steve produced a key from one of his pockets, and unlocked the door leading into the room.

It was small, and very plainly furnished with a pallet-bed, a couple of chairs, and a deal table; but it looked quite comfortable, when compared with the dreariness and the emptiness that seemed to pervade every other part of the dwelling.

Of course, Dick had followed the villains noiselessly down the stairs as far as the open cellar.

There, hidden behind some empty barrels, he waited, with all the patience he could com-

mand, the next move the two desperate men would make.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE TRAIL.

PHILIP JOCELYN was laid on the pallet-bed and Steve took his stand beside it.

"I say, Ben," he muttered, after a brief silence, "ain't it about time the cove was comin' to his senses?"

"Of course it is. You'd better give him a taste of the bottle."

He pushed a brandy flask into his comrade's hand, as he spoke.

Steve poured in a small quantity of the liquor between Philip's lips. The fiery draft did its work well, and the young man soon opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked, looking around with a bewildered stare.

Steve laughed in a half-sneering manner.

"Where you'll be taken good care of for the present, sir."

"What do you mean? Am I a prisoner?"

"That's about the long and short of it, I reckon."

Philip was silent a moment. He now remembered what had happened. Of course these two ruffians were the same who had set upon him in the alley, when Dick Daredevil and Julia came to his rescue.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" he asked, at last, a glow of indignation coming into his eyes.

"Don't ask any questions, and we'll tell you no lies," said Ben.

"At whose instigation have I been brought to this wretched place?"

"That's our secret." It was Steve who answered this time. "But no violence will be offered if you take things sensible like, and don't make an infernal rumpus."

"How long am I to be detained here?"

"Don't know. Until a certain person, who must be nameless, is ready to set you free, I suppose. You are to be kept out of the way for a few weeks—that's all."

"Ah!"

A light began to break upon Philip's mind. In whose way could he be, unless it was Mrs. Lauderdale's? She, and she only, could have an object in keeping him a prisoner for a short time.

"We must be off," Ben now broke in, somewhat impatiently. "It will be daylight in a few minutes more."

"That's so."

Steve swung on his heel. "You'll be left quite alone in the house for a few days, sir," he said, striding toward the door and turning with his hand on the latch. "But it won't be of any use for you to holler, or try to get out, for in the first case, nobody would hear you, and in the second, you'd only have your trouble for your pains. We'll be back again after nightfall, with food, and other things to make you comfortable."

He went out as he spoke, followed by Ben. Then they closed and carefully locked the door.

They passed very near to the pile of old barrels behind which Dick Daredevil had hidden himself. Instinctively the intrepid young fellow groped in the dark for something with which to defend himself.

It was unnecessary. They did not think it of any use to search the cellar, and passed up the stairs without having done so.

Five minutes later he heard the roll of wheels as the carriage was driven away.

"Good," he muttered, crawling out of his place of refuge and vigorously shaking his cramped limbs. "Now the coast is clear. When those two worthies come again, they'll find that their bird has flown, unless I'm very much mistaken."

He crawled up the rickety stairs, and took his stand in the hall, where he waited until day had really dawned.

Then, having seen nor heard anything to indicate any human presence about the house, he descended to effect Philip's release.

"Are you there, Mr. Jocelyn?" he shouted, pounding on the door with his knuckles.

"Yes. Who calls?" came from within.

"Dick Daredevil."

There was an exclamation of surprise and delight. "God bless you, Dick!" cried Philip, excitedly. "You have come to give me my liberty?"

"Of course."

"Quick, quick! I can scarcely breathe in this stifling hole."

"Try to be patient, sir."

The ruffians had taken away the key, and the door was a heavy, iron-clamped affair, that looked almost capable of withstanding a siege. For a moment Dick regarded it somewhat dubiously.

"It's equal to storming the Bastille," he muttered. "But I'm not the person to be easily baffled. So here goes to the rescue."

He tore down a stout timber that had once been used as a support, but from which the foundations had long since rotted away. Using this as a battering ram, he soon had the satisfaction of seeing the door tremble before it and give way.

The next instant he and Philip were shaking each other cordially by the hand.

"It's very odd that we should meet thus, after parting as we did last night," said Philip.

"Odd! It's like a play, sir. I never knew anything like it."

"How did you happen to find me here?"

In a very few words Dick related all that had occurred.

"I was cursing my ill luck in being so completely hoodwinked by Belmont, when the two ruffians who had you in tow made their appearance," he said, in conclusion. "Of course, when I saw who it was, I laid low, and waited till the coast was clear, that I might come to your assistance."

"It was well. Now we can set out together in quest of Mabel Trevor."

"You think she can not be far from here?"

"I am sure of it."

"And my opinion exactly coincides with your own."

"Belmont must have suspected the game you were playing on him in pretending to be drunk."

"Of course. But he dealt me an ugly blow in the hall above. He thought it would put an end to my investigations, I suppose."

Then, after a pause, he added:

"You have not told me how you happened to be nabbed."

In a few words Philip put him in possession of all the facts pertaining to his own adventure.

Dick looked thoughtful. "Have you any idea who is at the bottom of this affair?" he asked.

"Yes. A certain Mrs. Lauderdale, of whom, I think, you know nothing."

A brief conversation followed in regard to the proper course to pursue, and then the two young men quitted the house.

The country round about looked singularly wild and desolate, considering its nearness to the great city. Of course they could only strike out at random, not knowing which way to turn.

After wandering about for some time, they finally struck into a high road. Here, fortunately, they soon fell in with a rough-looking lad, who was driving two lazy cows before him.

"My fine fellow," said Dick, persuasively, "can you tell me who lives in this neighborhood?"

"I do," answered the boy, with a saucy toss of his head.

"Humph. Who else?"

"Lots o' folks, sir."

Philip now drew near and slipped some silver into the boy's dirty palm.

"Can you tell me?" he said, "if one Gilbert Belmont resides near?"

"Yes, sir, I think he does," returned the lad, his manner instantly becoming respectful.

"Leastwise, I believe that's the name. He's a queer sort o' man, and lives in a queer sort o' place, all shut in by bushes."

Dick and Philip exchanged glances.

"I think that must be the man we wish to find," said the latter.

"That's his house among them trees over yonder," pointing to a stack of chimneys visible in the distance. "It's called Hedge Hall, sir."

"Thank you."

The two men struck off in the direction indicated, and reached the house in question after much walking.

It stood by itself, solitary and alone; and seemed the fitting theater of crimes not destined for the public eye.

"Ah, me," sighed Philip. "To think that Mabel should be shut up in such a wretched place."

"But—she is shut up there—I'm sure of it," said Dick, doggedly.

"So am I."

"Then here goes to her rescue. It's of no use to ring the door-bell. We'll reconnoiter a bit, and then make our entree where and how we can."

He pushed his way through the hedge as he spoke, and Philip quickly followed him.

Afterward they silently and noiselessly approached the house.

A balcony ran all along one side, which was approached by a flight of iron steps.
"Here goes," whispered Dick, beginning to ascend. "We're in for it, sure enough."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A CRY FOR HELP.

WHEN Gilbert Belmont took his departure from Hedge Hall the morning subsequent to the incarceration of our heroine within its walls, it will be remembered that she was still a prisoner in the blue chamber.

For some reason best known to herself, Mrs. Pratt seemed to be half afraid of the girl. Instead of taking up the casket of diamonds with Mabel's breakfast, as Belmont had ordered, she merely pushed the tray containing that meal inside the door, and then went away without speaking.

But as the day wore on she saw the necessity of overcoming this feeling, since the master of the house might arrive at any moment. He would be angry if he discovered that his command had not been obeyed.

Accordingly, late in the afternoon, she knocked at the door and went in, taking the diamonds with her.

Her face was quite pale, and she trembled a little when her glance fell on the young girl, who sat in a dejected attitude on the side of the bed.

"See," she cried, advancing with the casket standing open in her hand, so that the light dropped into the jewels, and was sent off in a dozen sparkling atoms of bewildering splendor; "see what a handsome present I have brought you, miss. It is Mr. Belmont's gift."

Mabel drew back, shuddering.

"I do not want his costly gifts," she moaned.

"All I ask at his hands is liberty."

"That," said Mrs. Pratt, "is the one boon he cannot grant."

"Why does he seek to detain me here?"

"Because he loves you."

"Love!" echoed the hapless girl, scornfully.

"I doubt if he knows the meaning of the word. We do not seek to injure those we love."

"No; but those we love are sometimes obdurate, and we are compelled to tame them."

"Ah, just Heaven!"

"Do take the diamonds," pleaded Mrs. Pratt.

"Gilbert is very anxious that you should. You must take them. Where is the harm?"

Mabel looked up quickly.

"Tell me," she said, "in what relation you stand to that wicked man?"

"I—I—am his housekeeper!"

She bit her lip, and grew paler than before, as she answered.

"You may not be wholly vile!" cried the poor captive, rising, and standing with clasped hands before Mrs. Pratt. "Oh, for the love of Heaven, help me to escape from this place!"

The woman drew back, impatiently shaking her head.

"I tell you I can't do that. You'd better take the diamonds, like a sensible girl, and make yourself as comfortable as possible."

"Then you will not help me?"

"No."

She tossed the casket on the couch and turned to leave the room. But she paused at the door, and went back.

"Gilbert told me your name," she said, abruptly, and in a slightly unsteady voice. "But he did not confide in me any further than that. Have you any objection to telling me some particulars of your history?"

Mabel was very much surprised by the request; but she answered readily:

"Not the slightest. I am—or at least suppose myself to be—an orphan. I was brought up by an old woman called Granny Wells; but she was no relative, I am sure."

"Granny Wells!" cried Mrs. Pratt, with a start.

"Yes. Did you know her?"

"No, no. Go on."

"That is about all I can tell you. My parentage seems to be involved in the most profound mystery. And yet I have reason to think I am in some way connected with a wealthy family living near Hoboken."

"The name of that family?"

"Laudersdale."

Mrs. Pratt wildly threw up her hands.

"Ah!" she screamed. "I knew it! I knew it!"

Mabel was by her side in an instant.

"Knew what?" she cried. "Tell me at once. What did you know?"

"Nothing."

Mrs. Pratt pushed off the girl's clinging hands, and seemed to be struggling with herself for some minutes. At last she said, wearily, pressing one hand to her brow:

"I must be half crazed. Please don't mind what I say, my dear young lady. I mean nothing by my wild words."

"It is not true," said Mabel, in a low, intense voice. "I believe you have made a discovery. You know who and what I am."

Mrs. Pratt uttered a scornful laugh, but turned away without speaking. Her lips were still white, and trembled a little.

Mabel sprung after her, clutching wildly at her gown.

"Will you not tell me what I wish to know?" she cried, her lovely eyes uplifted in pitiful entreaty. "For the love of Heaven, do not keep me in suspense. Would you like to be haunted by such a terrible mystery, that seems perpetually on the point of solution, and yet never is solved? Would you like to remain in ignorance of the name, rank, and station of your own father and mother? Then, for mercy's sake, tell me what you have found out, or think you have found out."

Mrs. Pratt seemed moved by Mabel's agony. For an instant she hesitated.

"No," she said, at last, tearing her dress rudely from the grasp that would have held it, "I can tell you nothing."

Then she quitted the apartment.

"It would be useless to speak out," she muttered, as she slowly descended the stairs. "No good could come of speaking, at the present time. But, if Gilbert marries that girl then will I confess all I know of her parentage."

The hour was very late when Belmont returned to Hedge Hall, that night. He seemed anxious and distressed, and gave but a very meager greeting.

"Gilbert is out of sorts," thought the loving woman, watching him anxiously. "I wonder what has gone wrong."

The reader already knows what has occurred to distress this scheming villain. It was on that very night that Dick Daredevil had climbed up behind his carriage near the gambling-hell on Broadway, and been left for dead in the lonely old house to which he had suffered himself to be enticed.

Of course this tissue of circumstances had left its impress on Belmont's spirits. It could not well have other than a depressing effect.

Owing to all this, he did not visit his captive until a late hour of the following morning.

Mrs. Pratt preceded him to Mabel's apartment. This singular woman had quite recovered from her agitation of the previous day, and her small eyes twinkled with pleasure and ill-concealed satisfaction as they rested upon the hapless girl.

"I've brought your lover to see you, miss," she said, maliciously.

Poor Mabel uttered a low cry of dismay, and retreated to the furthest corner of the chamber.

"Oh, Heaven protect me!" she murmured.

"Bah!" cried Mrs. Pratt, with an angry snort. "Have you no fitter welcome for the man who loves you? See, Gilbert, there are diamonds, tumbled under the table, as if they were not worth a penny. Who ever saw such a girl?"

"Never mind the baubles," said Belmont, hastily approaching.

"Humph! Of course it's just as you please. I'd better take myself off, and leave you to plead your own cause."

"No," with an impatient wave of the hand; "remain where you are."

"Dear Mabel," he added, turning to the girl, and speaking in a softer tone of voice, "I wish Mrs. Pratt to hear me tell you how much I love you."

He sought to take her hands, but the poor frightened bird fled from him, shrieking in uncontrollable terror.

He hurried after her, with a muttered curse on his lips, and caught her, panting and breathless, in his arms.

"It is useless to beat your wings, pretty one," he whispered. "You'd better take things coolly."

"Help! help!"

The cry burst from her, almost involuntarily. At the same instant steps were heard on the balcony outside the window—the sash was burst open with a blow that shattered glass and all—and Philip Jocelyn bounded into the apartment, followed by Dick Daredevil.

"Coward!" cried Philip, tearing Mabel from Belmont's embrace, and at the same time dealing the villain a powerful blow that sent him

reeling against the wall. "Thank God, I am here in time to foil you!"

A volley of the most dreadful curses broke from Belmont's lips. For a breath-long space he stood staring at the daring intruders, speechless from rage and fury.

Then his right hand sought his breast, and clutched a small revolver, the muzzle of which covered Philip's heart, the next instant.

This movement was the signal for action on the part of Dick Daredevil. With a howl like the roar of a wild beast, he sprang upon the villain, wrenched the weapon from his grasp, and turned it against its owner.

"Take that for your treachery!" he shouted, pulling sharply at the trigger.

The weapon exploded, and Belmont fell to the floor with a groan of pain.

A shrill, piercing shriek filled the room—a shriek of such bitter anguish that it rung in Dick's ears for many a long day afterward.

Then Mrs. Pratt tottered forward, and threw herself on the body of the fallen man.

"You have killed him!" she screamed. "You have killed my—"

The words died away in a hollow moan. Mrs. Pratt had fainted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TAKING REFUGE.

THERE was an instant's dead silence in the room. Then Philip put Mabel away from him—for she lay sobbing and trembling in his arms—and bent over the two figures lying on the floor.

There was a groan from Belmont.

"Help me up," he growled, savagely, "unless you wish to kill me outright."

Dick helped to raise him, and they laid him on the couch. Then Philip hastened to learn the extent of his injuries.

"It is nothing more than a flesh wound," he said, presently. "With the proper care, no evil results are to be apprehended."

Belmont muttered an oath; but Dick Daredevil drew a deep breath of relief.

"I'm glad of that," he said, cold beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. "Murder is an ugly business. I'm not used to that sort of thing. I meant to stop the villain's little game, but I don't want his blood on my hands. God forbid."

"Bah!" sneered Belmont. "You're softer-hearted than I would have been in your place. But the power is all in your hands, just at present, curse you."

"Yes, the power is in our hands."

Dick helped to raise Mrs. Pratt as he spoke. A glass of wine stood on the mantel, and he poured a few drops of the red liquid between her lips.

She heaved a deep sigh, and slowly unclosed her eyes.

At the same instant, footsteps were heard to ascend the stairs.

Again Philip Jocelyn caught Mabel's half-fainting form in his arms.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Follow me, Dick. We must get out of this before our enemies are reinforced."

He sprang through the window with his precious burden, and darted down the balcony steps to the lawn, followed closely by Dick.

It is probable that Gilbert Belmont had no servants in the house on whose fidelity he could rely, for no opposition was offered to their departure—no pursuit made.

The two young men hurried as rapidly as Mabel's trembling limbs would permit—to the nearest house, where they hired a boy to drive them to the city.

When they were once safely ensconced in the rude farm-wagon which was their conveyance, Mabel related her simple story, sobbing like a child the while, for she felt very grateful because of Philip's opportune arrival.

"Take me at once to Woodlawn," she pleaded. "Let me face Mrs. Laudersdale and her husband together. Then, I am sure, we can come at the truth of what that wicked woman knows of me."

But Philip gravely shook his head.

"You are not strong enough for such an ordeal," he said. "You must have perfect rest and quiet for a few days. Then it shall be as you wish."

Mabel looked troubled.

"Where am I to remain during the interim?" she asked, presently.

"I will take you to some of my own friends where you can remain in safety."

At this point Dick interrupted them.

"You forget, Mr. Jocelyn," he said, "that it is very necessary for you, also, to lie *perdu* for the present. Your life or liberty, perhaps both, are threatened. If you go back to your old haunts, your enemies will know where to find you again."

"True."

There was a thoughtful silence, which Dick broke at last.

"I know a place which would afford a safe refuge for yourself as well as Miss Trevor."

Philip's face brightened. It was very pleasant to think of remaining several days under the same roof that sheltered Mabel.

"Where is it?" he asked, eagerly.

"A boarding-house in Canal street. I know the landlady well, and she can be trusted. You will not be compelled to come in contact with the other boarders unless you wish."

"Perhaps we had better go there until Mabel's spirits have recovered their usual tone."

And the matter was thus decided.

They dismissed the driver while still a couple of squares from their destination, and continued their journey on foot. It was better to give Belmont no clue by which to trace them.

They were soon seated in a private room of the boarding-house in question.

Dick did most of the talking that was necessary.

"Mrs. Brown," he said, addressing the landlady, a square-jawed but not unkind-looking woman, "this young gentleman and lady are my friends. I have brought them here to you, and promised them your sympathy and protection."

"That was right, Dick," Mrs. Brown returned, heartily. "Anybody that you bring to this house is sure of a welcome."

Then, regarding the young couple somewhat curiously, she said:

"You are brother and sister, I suppose?"

"No," replied Mabel, blushing.

"No? Bless me! You can't be husband and wife?"

"No, no," blushing more vividly than ever.

"Ah! I understand. You are lovers, of course. No much the better. You shall have the best of every thing the house affords."

"Please bear in mind, Mrs. Brown," put in Dick, "that they wish to remain very quiet for the present. In fact, they will see no company whatever."

The woman's eyes dilated a little; but she only answered:

"Of course."

"You have spare apartments where the necessary privacy can be secured? Circumstances compel them to seclude themselves for a brief season. In fact, the young lady has powerful enemies who seek her life."

Mrs. Brown's sympathies were thoroughly enlisted.

"I'm glad you brought the young girl here. Poor dear. I'd like to see the villain who would dare tear her away from my house!"

And the good woman shut her lips sharply together, thus giving emphasis to what she said.

"I must take leave of you for the present," said Dick. "Miss Mabel have you no message to send to Julia?"

"Yes," cried Mabel, eagerly. "Tell her how grateful I am—how much I love her. Tell her, too, that I am praying for the day to come when I can repay her kindness."

Dick bowed low. This loving message to such a girl as Julia touched him as nothing else could have done.

"Heaven bless you, lady," he said, gently.

"If the time ever comes when Dick Dare-devil can do aught to serve you, you can reckon on the very last drop of blood in his veins."

He swung on his heel as he spoke, and, in another minute, was gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

POISON!

In her luxuriously-furnished boudoir at Woodlawn sat Mrs. Laudersdale, dreaming her own wild dreams of increased wealth and power.

"All works well," she murmured, softly, to herself. "Mabel is dead, and Philip has been placed in such close confinement that it is out of his power to molest me or make any untoward discoveries. I am fortunate."

A sneering smile curled her full red lip as she thus soliloquized.

Ah, how different would have been her feelings had she known that Mabel was still living and that Philip had escaped, and the two were only awaiting a fitting opportunity to confront her and expose her true character to the world!

At this moment a servant entered, bearing a soiled and greasy note on a silver salver.

"For me?" queried Mrs. Laudersdale, in real surprise.

"For madam," returned the polite servant, and departed.

Mrs. Laudersdale glanced sharply at the address, and seemed to recognize the hand, for a sudden pallor overspread her face.

"Richard!" she muttered; "or rather, Miles, as he chooses to designate himself. What can he want of me, I wonder?"

She tore open the envelope. The inclosure was very brief, and read thus:

"I have found out all I can concerning the man on whose track you set me. But I don't feel disposed to come to Woodlawn to make my revelations. You had better come to me. It will be safer."

"Bring money, and plenty of it. I won't brook any stinginess on your part. You will find me at No. 83 Cherry street, this afternoon at four. I advise you to be on hand."

MILES.

Mrs. Laudersdale's face darkened ominously as she read this letter.

"I'll come, oh, never fear but that I'll come!" she said, in a low, hissing tone.

Her supple white hands began to twist about each other with a nervous movement which would have betrayed, even to a casual observer, how deeply the woman was moved.

"Of course Miles refers to Gilbert Belmont in the opening of this letter," she muttered, after she had sat thinking, thinking for a long, long time. "I had half forgotten that he was set to watch Belmont. But it is well."

Then a sudden lurid light flashed into her false but beautiful eyes.

"That man, Miles, is my evil genius," she panted. "He has it in his power to ruin me at any moment. And he'll do it, too, if I show the least sign of rebellion. I understand his game. He intends to bleed me, bleed me like a leech, until there is nothing left for his avaricious hands to seize upon; but I can not submit to it; I will not!"

She rose with a fierce, impetuous movement, and crossed to a small cabinet that stood in one corner of the apartment.

"Oh, yes, Miles Duff, I'll come to Cherry street to see you," she said, between her set teeth, while fumbling in a small drawer full of vials and packages. "I'll come, and bring the money. But I shall bring something else, too!"

And a smile of deadly meaning curled her red lips.

She had evidently come to some dark and terrible decision. But it was a decision known only to herself; for on this occasion she took neither Jane Burt nor Bill Cuppings into her counsels. It was an ominous fact.

The day wore on. Mrs. Laudersdale left the house, unperceived by any of the servants, and when the city clocks chimed the hour of four, she was in Cherry street, and knocking at the door of No. 83.

It was a ruinous old building, with half its windows boarded up, and did not look as if it had had an occupant for many years.

The bold, bad woman's eyes twinkled wickedly as she took cognizance of this fact.

After her summons had been repeated two or three times, the door was opened by Miles himself.

"And so you thought it best to keep the appointment I made?" he said, recognizing her instantly despite the thick veil she had thrown over her face. "It is well. Come in."

She followed him into a small, meagerly-furnished apartment at the back of the house.

"I suppose we are perfectly safe from intrusion?" she said, seating herself in one of the rush-bottomed chairs.

"Of course. You can lay aside your veil. There are only us two in the whole house."

"Ah!" starting a little. "But others may be coming in."

Miles laughed disdainfully.

"No fear of that. I've hired the house all to myself. Nobody else has any business here."

Mrs. Laudersdale looked at him attentively.

"What could you want of the old shell?" she asked.

"Bah! Don't be too inquisitive, Martha. Trust me to make it useful. It will be a good trysting-place for you and me, love, if it answers no other purpose. Besides, I can afford the expense, since you have become my banker."

She winced.

"Never mind that," she said, hastily. "Let us to business. What discoveries have you made in regard to Gilbert Belmont?"

"Before answering that question," said Miles, "I would like to know how much money you have brought with you."

"A good deal—some hundreds. See, here it is."

She took a small packet of bills from her pocket, and laid it on the table. "Let it remain there while we are talking," she added.

Miles chuckled cunningly.

"And so, my lady, you wish to hear about Belmont? Well, I can tell you all that any man can tell of him. He's a gambler in good luck. In fact, he is a rich man. He has a farmhouse in upper Broadway—a private dwelling in Westchester county—besides other property."

Mrs. Laudersdale bit her lip sharply.

"And his family?" she cried, eagerly.

"Humph. The less said about his descent—if that is what you mean—the better."

She was thoughtfully silent for some minutes. At last she rose and moved toward the door. But, with her hand on the knob, she paused, and finally went back.

"I had half forgotten," she murmured, softly.

"I brought you a bottle of wine, Richard. You see, I can't quite forget the old time—that I am a little thoughtful of your comfort still."

"Yes," he said, bitterly, "I see."

"You have glasses?"

"Here are two," bringing them from a small cupboard over the mantel.

Mrs. Laudersdale sat down by the table, and poured the wine with an unsteady hand.

"My nerves are all unstrung," she said. "I need the stimulant quite as much as you do."

He looked at her darkly as she pushed a brimming glass toward him with the single word:

"Drink!"

"How do I know that you haven't poisoned the infernal stuff?"

For an instant she trembled and gasped for breath. Then a sneering laugh fell from her lips, and she thrust out one of her jeweled hands.

"Give the glass to me," she said, "if you are afraid to drink."

"I am not afraid."

He raised it to his lips and drained it to the dregs.

A mortal paleness overspread Mrs. Laudersdale's face. She put back her own glass, scarcely having tasted its contents.

There was a long silence. Miles sat watching that beautiful though cowering and trembling woman, a white horror gradually stealing into his own countenance as he did so.

"Why don't you drink?" he asked, at last.

She rose, feebly.

"I am faint—ill!" she gasped.

He followed her. The horrible fear that had beset him, became of a sudden, a certainty.

"Woman! devil!" he shrieked, "what have you done?"

She cowered before him, but did not answer.

"You have poisoned me!" he yelled, with his hand laid over his heart. "That wine was drugged!"

"Yes," she said, "it was drugged!"

A volley of the most dreadful curses fell from his lips. A loaded pistol lay on the mantel, and he made a sudden bound for it.

But Mrs. Laudersdale had seen it and was too quick for him. She snatched up the weapon and leveled it straight against his heart.

"You see I am prepared to defend myself," she said, a steely ring in her voice.

Miles stood still, glaring at her like some wild animal at bay. Presently he threw up both hands, with a sharp cry, and fell to the floor in strong convulsions.

The guilty woman leaned over him, laughing a horribly-mocking laugh. She knew that the deadly drug was doing its work.

"Meddling fool," she hissed, "you have received your just deserts. You will die here alone. There is nobody in the house to hear your cries. You will die alone and uncalled for. You are doomed."

"You would have bled me, and worried and harassed the very life out of me. Sooner or later you would have exposed me to the world. Ah, I know you! But you are foiled. I can breathe again. You will die, and the secret of the past will die with you. Thank God for that—thank God for that."

Then, without as much as a glance at the writhing form of her victim, she passed quickly from the room, slipping the bolt of the door into its socket as she passed out.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PREPARING THE GROUND.

PHILIP JOCELYN and Mabel, meanwhile, passed a few very happy days under Mrs. Brown's humble roof.

They were dreaming young love's blissful

dream, and of course the hours fled by as if silver-shod.

They were free from all molestation. Nobody visited them save Dick Daredevil, and even he came rarely. Thus they were thrown much together, and the interest that they had felt for each other from the first grew and strengthened.

If Philip had felt any false pride drawing him away from the innocent and trusting girl at one time, he had now given it up forever.

True love makes all stations in life equal.

The young couple had very little to fear. Belmont was laid up with the wound he had received, and could not well continue his persecutions, even though he felt so disposed.

As for the two ruffians, Steve and Bill, who had sought to incarcerate Philip in that ruinous old country-house, they were powerless to concoct any fresh schemes against him, for the very good reason that they were unable to trace him to the place of refuge he had chosen.

As the reader must readily guess, they had failed to confide to Jane Burt the fact of his escape; therefore it had not come to Mrs. Laudersdale's ears.

As the days wore on, and Mabel Trevor rapidly recovered her health and spirits, she began to grow impatient to go to Woodlawn and force Mrs. Laudersdale's guilty secret from her.

"This anxiety and uncertainty are very depressing," she said to Philip one day. "I am anxious to know the best or the worst, as soon as possible."

Philip did not confide to her his own suspicions. He thought it better to excite no hopes in her bosom that might not be realized.

"You shall go to Woodlawn to-morrow," he said. "And if Mrs. Laudersdale knows aught of your parentage, we will assuredly find means to make her divulge that knowledge."

Mabel looked thoughtful. "There is one woman who might, I think, be of material use to us in what we have to do," she said, at last.

"Who is that?"

"Mrs. Pratt."

Philip knew very well to whom she referred. "What!" he cried, with a start. "Is it possible that that woman is mixed up in your affairs?"

The young girl told him all that had transpired at Hedge Hall. He listened to the recital in real amazement.

"I think you are right," he said, thoughtfully. "That woman ought to accompany us to Woodlawn. And she shall! I will go for her early in the morning."

Mabel started and shuddered.

"Will it be safe?" she asked. "Remember that you have secret and powerful enemies."

Those enemies will, I am sure, be put to utter rout the instant we enter the doors of Woodlawn," he said, with a singular smile. "Besides, I shall take a sufficient force with me, when I go to Hedge Hall, to guard against all evil."

"Mrs. Pratt may refuse to return with you."

"I do not think she will."

Mabel seemed not a little surprised at the positive tones in which he spoke.

"How can you feel so assured?" she asked.

"I know enough of Gilbert Belmont's doings to hand him over to the officers of justice. With that threat dinning in her ears, Mrs. Pratt will consent to anything. You have seen how fond she is of him. I am sure a secret relationship of some sort exists between the two."

"The same thought has occurred to me."

"We can, you see, count on Mrs. Pratt's help through her love for Gilbert Belmont. She will divulge anything rather than he should come to harm."

The event proved how correct Philip Jocelyn was in his conjectures. When he returned from the hurried visit he paid to Hedge Hall the next morning, Mrs. Pratt came with him.

She was looking strangely pale and hollow-eyed. Suffering had already plowed some very heavy lines in her faded cheeks; but she greeted Mabel pleasantly, though sadly.

"I am really glad that the truth is to be spoken at last," she said, in a very low tone of voice. "It should have been spoken years ago. But I had not the courage then, to make such a revelation. I have suffered, and suffered terribly, for keeping silent, however. Knowing that, I trust you will be merciful—"

"Then you do know the secret of my birth?" said Mabel, eagerly.

"I fully believe that I do."

A low cry of intense joy fell from the young girl's lips.

"Tell me instantly," she exclaimed. "Oh, I have waited so long and hopefully for this hour! Tell me instantly, what you believe."

Mrs. Pratt gravely shook her head.

"My dear, you must be content to wait a few hours longer. Presently you shall know all. But just now, I want time to collect my own thoughts."

She moved away to one of the windows, and stood with her back turned toward the trembling girl.

At last, Philip approached, and clasped Mabel's hand in both his own.

"Be patient," he whispered, "and try to calm yourself. All will soon be well."

After a minute's silence, he added, in the same low tone:

"I want to tell you something of my expedition to Hedge Hall. At first it was difficult to gain admittance. But when the doors were finally thrown open to me, I was conducted at once to Belmont's chamber. I found him very ill indeed—a relapse, I think. But he is a changed man. I believe he sincerely regrets the past, though he did not say so. But he has found ample time for reflection while lying on his sick bed, and I am sure that reflection has been of signal service to him."

"God grant it," cried Mabel, fervently.

"He received me kindly enough," Philip went on, "and on learning the object of my visit, seemed anxious to assist me in every manner possible. He very willingly consented that Mrs. Pratt should come away with me."

"I had a sort of penchant for pretty Mabel myself, at one time," he said to me, "but that is all over now. This cursed wound interfered with my plans, somewhat. Now I shall be glad to see her wedded to a man more worthy of her than I can ever hope to be."

"That was all, Mabel. Mrs. Pratt came away with me quite willingly. And here we are, as you perceive."

Mabel lifted her blushing face.

"Let us set out at once," she said, eagerly.

"We are wasting precious time."

Five minutes later, the three were seated in the conveyance that was to take them the first stage of the journey to Woodlawn.

Mabel had seated herself near the window. When the carriage drew near the ferry, she caught violently hold of Philip's arm.

"See!" she cried, sharply; "there is Miles, one of the villains who were engaged in my abduction."

Philip glanced quickly out of the window. There, indeed, in a carriage nearly abreast the one which they themselves occupied, sat, or rather reclined, a heavily-built man, with a most villainous physiognomy.

He was propped up among the cushions, and his pallid face and sunken eyes betokened illness.

Indeed it was a strange and ghastly pallor that had settled upon his features.

He looked like a person whose days were numbered.

It was, indeed, Miles Duff—the same Miles Duff whom Mrs. Laudersdale (as she thought) had left writhing on the floor in his death-agonies, in that gloomy old house in Cherry street, only a few days previously.

The hardened sinner did not see Mabel, however, and the two carriages drew apart almost immediately.

But our heroine was destined to see Miles once again, that day.

CHAPTER XXX.

UNEARTHING THE TRUTH.

At an early hour of the afternoon, our little party reached Woodlawn.

Philip ascended the steps with a proud, firm tread, holding the trembling figure of Mabel Trevor clasped closely to his side.

"Courage," he whispered. "You have naught to fear, my darling. Whatever turn events may take, I promise to protect you with my own life, if necessary."

A servant almost instantly made his appearance in answer to Philip's ring.

"I wish to see your master and mistress," said the young man, quietly.

"Master is in the library. Come right in, sir," said the servant, politely, for he knew that Philip had always been a welcome visitor at Woodlawn.

The whole party found themselves in the library a few minutes later.

A handsome, florid-looking gentleman, of about fifty years of age, was seated at a desk near the center of the apartment. This was Jasper Laudersdale. He rose up in some trepidation when Philip was announced, but came eagerly forward with his hand extended in welcome, for the young man had always been a favorite with him.

"My dear fellow," he cried, "this is a sur-

prise. Where have you been keeping yourself of late?"

Instead of replying to this question, Philip abruptly pushed Mabel before him, and flung back the veil that covered her pale, convulsed features.

"First of all," he cried, in a deep voice, "tell me if you recognize this young lady. Afterward we will talk of other matters if you are so disposed."

Mr. Laudersdale stared hard at Mabel for a moment. Then a sharp cry broke from his lips. He dropped into a chair, ghastly white, and gasping for breath.

"Oh! my God!" he groaned.

"Do you know her?" Philip demanded, fiercely.

"She is the living image of my dead wife!"

At those words Mabel tottered forward and flung herself on her knees at his feet.

"Father," she whispered, faintly.

Jasper Laudersdale looked dumbfounded—almost beside himself. It will be remembered that he had not seen Mabel on the occasion of her former visit to Woodlawn. Now she appeared to him like one suddenly risen from the dead.

"I don't know how it can be possible," he murmured, brokenly, as he raised Mabel in his arms. "But something whispers in my ear that you are my child."

Mrs. Pratt advanced slowly. "It is well," she said, "for I am sure that you are parent and child."

These words were still on her lips when the room-door swung quickly open, and Mrs. Laudersdale came hurrying into the apartment.

She had just been told of Philip's presence in the house, and thus learned, for the first time, of his escape from the ruffians whom she had hired to keep him in close confinement.

She looked anxious and flurried. But the instant her gaze fell upon Mabel's shrinking figure resting in the arms of her husband, she recoiled, uttering a choking cry of horror, and staggered against the wall with her hands pressed tightly over her eyes as if to shut out some terrible sight.

"Ah, just Heaven!" she moaned. "Has the grave given up its dead?"

After a long silence, Philip went up to her. "Woman," he said, in a harsh, constrained manner, "I begin to comprehend the little game you have been playing. But you may take your hands from your eyes. Mabel is flesh and blood like yourself."

A violent shudder shook the guilty creature's frame. She seemed to struggle with herself. At last she looked up—

"Tell me the meaning of this strange scene," she said haughtily.

"It means," replied Philip, "that your husband has found the daughter whom he has believed for so many years to be dead."

Mrs. Laudersdale started forward, her face flushing purple.

"It is false!" she shrieked. "That creature is a wretched impostor!"

"It is true," said Philip, calmly.

"Yes," repeated Mrs. Pratt, who was now standing close to Mr. Laudersdale's chair, "it is true. And I am here to swear to its truth, and thus undo if possible a little of the harm I have wrought."

"And who, let me ask, are you?" said Mrs. Laudersdale, contemptuously.

"I am Dorcas Pratt, the woman who lived here as nurse-maid sixteen years ago."

Mrs. Laudersdale started, stared wildly, and a muttered exclamation fell from her lips. She was evidently very much frightened.

"Yes," went on Mrs. Pratt, in a feverish, eager way, "I lived as nurse-maid with the first Mrs. Laudersdale. And now I am come here to confess the crime of which I was guilty so many years ago."

"I thought you were dead," gasped Mrs. Laudersdale. "I thought you died long enough since."

"That was all a mistake. But let me tell my story briefly. At the time when the first Mrs. Laudersdale engaged my services I was a widow with a child of my own—a boy whom I had put out to nurse, for I was very poor, and my mistress had promised to pay me well."

"And that boy," interrupted Philip. "Where is he now?"

"You have seen him," said Mrs. Pratt, flushing up, and then growing paler than before. "Gilbert Belmont is my son. But he did not know this until yesterday. Then I told him the truth. I had kept it from him because I knew he was proud and ambitious. I thought he would not like to acknowledge such a mother."

But, thank God, it was all a mistake. He owns me and loves me at last."

She bowed her head for a moment, tears gushing plentifully from her eyes. Both Mabel and Philip comprehended now the nature of the strange power Belmont had seemed to possess over this woman. They pitied quite as much as they condemned her.

"But it was the story of the past that I came here to tell," she resumed, after a long pause. "I tell you I was poor, and ambitious for my own. It was my poverty and ambition that led me on to guilt. A man who called himself Bill Cuppings came to me and tempted me with a heavy bribe. I was to take my charge, the little Mabel, out for a walk near the river one day, and there resign her to his keeping, and then pretend to my master that she had fallen into the river and been drowned. He solemnly swore to me that no harm should be offered the child, and that she would only be detained from her parents for a few years, and then restored."

"At last I consented. I gave him the child. That same day my mistress fell suddenly ill and died before night. I suspected foul play of some sort. But I was too frightened to speak out my mind. And after two or three days of torture, I fled from the scene with my guilty secret still weighing upon my mind."

"That is all I have to say, except that I believe Mabel Trevor to be the same girl whom I resigned to the tender mercies of Bill Cuppings so many years ago. My secret has cost me much pain and torture. I am glad it is told at last."

Mr. Laudersdale had listened like one in a dream, his arms tightening in their pressure about Mabel's figure, as the recital proceeded.

"What do you mean," he demanded, in a horror-stricken voice, at its conclusion, "by insinuating that my wife did not die a natural death?"

Mrs. Pratt shuddered and began to tremble. "Perhaps I should not have said that!" she exclaimed. "I know nothing positively. But I could not help linking, in my own mind, the two events of that day. It seemed as if some terrible but powerful enemies were working against you."

The wretched man's head dropped on his breast. "Ah, merciful Heaven!" he moaned. "What if this should be true?—what if it should be true?"

In the next breath he added:

"Ring the bell, Philip. The Bill Cuppings of whom this woman has spoken is now in the house. If he knows any thing of this matter, he shall be compelled to speak the truth."

Philip had just turned to comply with Jasper Laudersdale's request, when the room door opened and Marcia Denvil, Jane Burt and Bill Cuppings himself entered the apartment.

Behind these three there came also a fourth individual.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HOUR OF DEFEAT.

The last comer was none other than Miles Duff.

He had entered the house unperceived by everybody, and had quietly followed in the rear of the little party that had been attracted to the library by the suspicion that something unusual was transpiring there.

Thus strangely had the leading characters of our story been drawn together in that room.

"What is the meaning of this scene?" demanded Marcia Denvil, pausing near the center of the apartment.

She had caught sight of Mabel, pressed close to the wildly-beating heart of Jasper Laudersdale.

The two brothers, Miles and Bill—brothers in infamy as well as by blood—had also seen the girl, and at the same moment.

They drew back at first, as if considerably disturbed. This was the first time they had seen Mabel since she had fled from Slaughter-house Point and the cruelty of Old Het.

Vainly had they sought some clue to her place of refuge. And now they could scarcely credit the evidence of their senses, which said that there she was, at last, right before them, and in the arms of the very man from whom they were pledged to keep her separated.

Miles instantly recovered his usual composure, however. Nobody had answered Marcia's question, and he suddenly pushed past her, and confronted Mrs. Laudersdale.

The guilty woman saw him at last. Her eyes wildly dilated, her face blanched to the ashen hue of a corpse, and the cold damps of fear stood out in beads upon her brow.

"Haunted!" came in a choking cry from her trembling lips.

Miles laughed—a low, harsh laugh, scarcely pleasant to listen to.

"Calm your fears, my dear Martha," he said, mockingly, "I didn't come from the other world, as you seem to imagine. In fact, you didn't succeed in sending me there when you made the attempt."

She only cowered further and further away from him, as if she would gladly have shrunk into the very wall itself.

"The truth is," he went on in a low tone of brooding hate, "you overdid the matter—put too big a dose of poison in the wine you gave me to drink. It acted as an emetic. My cries were heard, and help came, for all you fastened the doors so securely behind you. I have found the strength to crawl to this place—though I am still very weak. Can you guess why I have come? Can you guess?"

The last words were hissed between his close-shut teeth. Mrs. Laudersdale raised her head and stared at him stupidly. Her lips moved as if she were trying to speak, but no intelligible sound came from them.

"I have come to punish you for your treachery," hissed Miles, glaring at her with a look of fiendish hatred. "You were afraid of me, were you, and meant to put me out of the way? It does not surprise me. But you'll find that two can play at that sort of game."

Then, wheeling round so that he faced the whole company, he added, more calmly:

"I have a confession to make, good friends. Yonder trembling woman, who calls herself Mrs. Laudersdale, has no right to the name! She is my wife!"

The guilty creature found voice at last.

"It is false!" she shrieked, wildly flinging up her hands.

"It is true," said Miles, quietly. "I married her more than twenty years ago, under the name of Richard Denvil!"

There was an awed silence in the room after that. Bill Cuppings broke it.

"You?" he cried, in a tone of deep amazement. "Are you Richard Denvil?"

"That is one of my aliases," Miles answered. "You didn't know it before? Well, that isn't strange. I've passed under a good many names in my day that I did not confide to you, my worthy brother. Besides, you and I were separated at the time when I wooed and won Martha, and she lived with me as my wife. She played minor parts in some of the lower grade of theaters until our little daughter was born. Shortly afterward we agreed to separate, and I had lost sight of my loving wife until a few weeks since, when you, Bill, brought me to Woodlawn."

A low cry came from Marcia's lips. She crept close to her mother's side.

"Is that man my father?" she demanded. "Has he spoken the truth?"

The wretched woman looked slowly round the room. She read horror and condemnation in every eye, and knew that all was lost.

"Yes!" she cried, starting up, and flushing purple. "That fiend has spoken the truth. Denial on my part would be useless, I suppose. He is my husband. But I hoped and believed that he was dead, until he came to Woodlawn a few weeks since. I confess to every thing. He was in my way, and I sought to poison him. Ah, you look horrified, Jasper. But that man had driven me desperate. While he lived, I was like a person walking on a bridge of glass. I know it. I had learned to love ease, and luxury, and position, since having been made your wife. I did not mean to give them up."

She paused. Miles glared at her vindictively. "Go on," he said, in a low, deep voice. "I am sure there is very much more that ought to be told."

She shivered from head to foot as if a cold blast had blown upon her.

"Have you not humiliated me enough?" she moaned. "For the love of Heaven, spare me!"

"I will not. This is my revenge—and, it is sweet!"

"Listen," she said, covering her face with two trembling hands. "Jasper Laudersdale, what I have to say now concerns you more than anybody else. I had seen you long before your wife died, though you did not know that such a woman as myself had an existence at the time. You were rich and courted. I coveted your wealth and position. I determined to attain them. Bill Cuppings was my agent when he bartered with Mrs. Pratt for the disappearance of the little Mabel. That was the first stroke I made. Your wife died suddenly and mysteriously."

Jasper Laudersdale suddenly sprung to his feet.

"Tell me no more!" he cried, in a voice of horror. "Woman, fiend, tell me no more!"

Mrs. Laudersdale looked at Miles, a weary though half-scornful smile curling her lips. "Are you satisfied now?" she said. "Is your thirst for vengeance appeased? If so, I have no need to say more."

"You are a ruined woman, traitress," he sneered. "I am content."

She smiled again, then swiftly turned her back upon them all. A shivering of glass was heard between her teeth. Then she swung round again, a strange, unnatural pallor on her face.

"I have been foiled and baffled on every side," she said. "But nobody shall triumph in my defeat. I prefer death to disgrace."

Then, a bold, daring woman to the last, she staggered and fell forward, rudely pushing away the hands that would have held her up. There was scarcely a struggle—scarcely a quiver of the eyelids, and yet she was dead. She had perished by her own hand.

A few last words, and our story is done.

Philip married Mabel, and the young couple still reside at Woodlawn with Jasper Laudersdale, very happy in each other, and doing all in their power to wean the wretched old man from the remembrance of his sorrow.

They will eventually succeed, perhaps, but the wound was deep and terrible, and only time can heal it entirely.

He is passionately fond of Mabel, his new-found daughter, and in her tries to live over again the broken romance of his youth, before that unprincipled woman ever crossed his path.

Marcia left Woodlawn immediately after the burial of her mother. She was pressed to remain, but would not. Her pride had received a death-blow, and the scene of her prosperous days became utterly hateful to her. She had no other wish than to sever every link that bound her to the disgraceful past.

Mrs. Pratt offered her a home, and she accepted. She was with Gilbert Belmont—as he still calls himself—during his long convalescence. At last she married him, and they removed to France, where they still reside on the banks of one of its sunny rivers, trying to forget all that was wrong and wicked in their past lives, and to atone for it by doing good in the present.

Mrs. Pratt is with them, loved and revered by both; for they know the power of the temptation under which she erred, and are bound to be merciful.

Richard Morton, otherwise Dick Dare-devil, married the ballet-girl, Julia. Both have quitted the stage for good. In short, Dick has been set up in business in one of our Western cities through the kindness of Philip Jocelyn and is now a good and prosperous citizen.

Bill Cuppings fled to Montana, and his fate is still one of the secrets of the future.

Jane Burt may have followed him. At any rate, her meek face was suddenly missed from Woodlawn, and nothing has ever been heard from her.

Het Bender still pursues the "uneven" tenor of her way at Slaughter-house Point, and seems to be fonder than ever of Handsome Hal.

Retributive justice has not yet overtaken her. But the day of sorrow can not now be far distant.

Miles Duff languished for a few weeks, but eventually died from the effects of the poison he had drunk, it having completely undermined his health.

And so the curtain falls—as it should—leaving the good people all happy and at peace.

THE END.

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No. 97

Jane Eyre.

BY CHARLOTTE BRONTE.

CHAPTER I.

THERE was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds as somber, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it; I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons; dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John and Georgiana Reed.

The said Eliza, John and Georgiana were now clustered round their mamma in the drawing-room; she lay reclining on a sofa by the fireside, and, with her darlings about her, (for the time neither quarreling nor crying,) looked perfectly happy. Me she had dispensed from joining the group, saying, "She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but that until she heard from Bessie, and she could discover by her own observation that I was endeavoring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner—something lighter, franker, more natural, as it were—she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy little children."

"What does Bessie say I have done?" I asked.

"Jane, I don't like avilers or questioners; besides, there is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner. Be seated somewhere;

and, until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent."

A small breakfast-room adjoining the drawing-room; I slipped in there. It contained a book-case; I soon possessed myself of a volume, taking care that it should be one stored with pictures. I mounted into the window-seat; gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement.

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless

rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast.

I returned to my book—Bewick's History of British Birds; the letter-press thereof I cared little for, generally speaking; but there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. They were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of "the solitary rocks and promontories" by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindeness, or Naze, to the North Cape—

"Where the Northern Ocean in vast whirls
Boils round the naked, melancholy isles
Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge
Pours in among the stormy Hebrides."

Nor could I pass unnoticed the suggestions on the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia Spitzbergen,

Nova Zembla, Iceland, Greenland, with "the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space—that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights surround the pole, and concentrate the multiplied rigors of extreme cold." Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own—shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive. The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking.

I cannot tell what sentiment haunted the quiet, solitary churchyard with its inscribed headstone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly-risen crescent, attesting the hour of eventide.

The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms.



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PRICE, 5 CENTS

Charlotte Temple.

BY MRS. ROWSON.

CHAPTER I.

A BOARDING-SCHOOL.

"ARE you for a walk?" said Montraville to his companion, as they arose from the table; "are you for a walk, or shall we order a chaise and proceed to Portsmouth?" Belcour preferred the former; and they sauntered out to view the town, and to make remarks on the inhabitants as they returned from church.

Montraville was a lieutenant in the army; Belcour was his brother officer; they had been to take leave of their friends previous to their departure for America, and were now returning to Portsmouth, where the troops awaited orders for embarkment. They had stopped at Chichester to dine; and knowing they had sufficient time to reach the place of destination before dark, and yet allow them a walk, had resolved, it being Sunday afternoon, to take a survey of the Chichester ladies as they returned from their devotions.

They had gratified their curiosity, and were preparing to return to the inn without honoring any of the belles with particular attention, when Madame Du Pont, at the head of her school, descended from the church. Such an assemblage of youth and innocence naturally attracted the young soldiers: they stopped; and as the little cavalcade passed, almost involuntarily pulled off their hats. A tall, elegant girl looked at Montraville, and blushed; he instantly recollected the features of Charlotte Temple, whom he had once seen and danced with at a ball at Portsmouth. At the time he thought on her as a very lovely child, she being then only thirteen; but the improvement two years had made in her person, and the blush of recollection which suffused her cheeks as she passed, awakened in his bosom new and pleasing ideas. Vanity led him to think that pleasure at again beholding him might have occasioned the emotion he had witnessed; and the same vanity led him to wish to see her again.

"She is the sweetest girl in the world," said he, as he entered the inn. Belcour started. "Did you not notice her?" continued Montraville. She had on a blue bonnet, and with a pair of lovely eyes of the same color, has contrived to make me feel devilish odd about the heart."

"Poh," said Belcour, "a musket-ball from our friends, the Americans, may in a month or two make you feel worse."

"I never think of the future," said Montraville, "but am determined to make the most of the present, and would willingly compound with any kind Familiar who would inform me who the girl is, and how I might be likely to obtain an interview."

But no kind Familiar at that time appeared, and the chaise, which they had ordered, driving up to the door, Montraville and his companion were obliged to take leave of Chichester and its fair inhabitant, and proceed on their journey.

But Charlotte had made too great an impression on his mind to be easily eradicated; having therefore spent three whole days in thinking on her, and endeavoring to form some plan for seeing her, he determined to set off for Chichester, and trust to chance either to favor or frustrate his designs. Arriving at the verge of the town, he dismounted, and sending the servant forward with the horses, proceeded toward the place, where, in the midst of an extensive pleasure-ground, stood the mansion which contained the lovely Charlotte Temple. Montraville leaned on a broken gate, and looked earnestly at the house. The wall which surrounded it was high, and perhaps the Arguses who guarded the Hesperian fruit within were more watchful than those famed of old.

"Tis a romantic attempt," said he, "and should I even succeed in seeing and conversing with her, it can be productive of no good."

I must of necessity leave England in a few days, and probably may never return; why, then, should I endeavor to engage the affections of this lovely girl, only to leave her a prey to a thousand inquietudes? I will return to Portsmouth, and think no more about her."

The evening was now closed; a serene stillness reigned; and the moon, with her silver crescent, faintly illuminated the hemisphere.

The mind of Montraville was calmed by the serenity of the surrounding objects. "I will think on her no more," said he, and turned with an intention to leave the place; but as he turned, he saw the gate which led to the pleasure-grounds open, and two women came out, who walked arm-in-arm across the field. "I will at least see who these are," said he.

He overtook them, and, after saluting, begged leave to see them into the more frequented parts of the town; but how was he delighted, when, waiting for an answer, he discovered, under the concealment of a large bonnet, the face of Charlotte Temple.

He soon found means to ingratiate himself with her companion, who was a French teacher at the school, and at parting, slipped a letter he had purposely written, into Charlotte's hand, and five guineas into that of mademoiselle, who promised she would endeavor to bring her young charge, into the field again the next evening.



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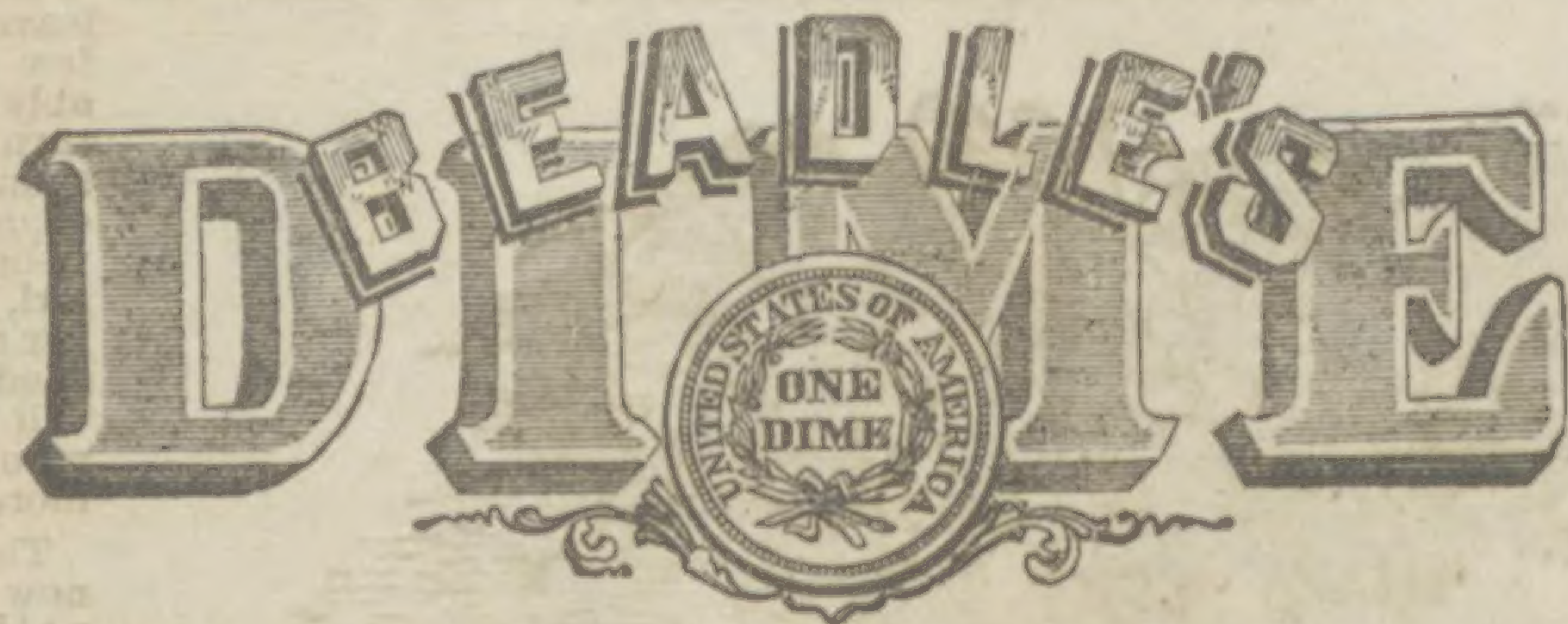
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The Gentle Client. Several males and one female.
Phrenology. A Discussion. For twenty males.
The Stubbletown Volunteer. 2 males and 1 female.
A Scene from "Paul Pry." For four males.
The Charms. For three males and one female.
Bee, Clock and Broom. For three little girls.
The Right way. A Colloquy. For two boys.
What the Ledger Says. For two males.
The Crimes of Dress. A Colloquy. For two boys.
The Reward of Benevolence. For four males.
The Letter. For two males.

Dime Dialogues, No. 5.

The Three Guesses. For school or parlor.
Sentiment. A "Three Persons" Farce.
Behind the Curtain. For males and females.
The Eta Pi Society. For five boys and a teacher.
Examination Day. For several female characters.
Trading in "Traps." For several males.
The Schoolboys' Tribunal. For ten boys.

THE STANDARD DIME DIALOGUES—Continued.

A Loose Tongue. For several males and females.
How Not to Get an Answer. For two females.
Putting on Airs. A Colloquy. For two males.
The Straight Mark. For several boys.
Two Ideas of Life. A Colloquy. For ten girls.
Extract from Marino Faliero.
Ma-try-Money. An Acting Charade.
The Six Virtues. For six young ladies.
The Irishman at Home. For two males.
Fashionable Requirements. For three girls.
A Bevy of I's (Eyes). For eight or less little girls.

Dime Dialogues, No. 6.

The Way They Kept a Secret. For male and females.
The Poet under Difficulties. For five males.
William Tell. For a whole school.
Woman's Rights. For seven females and two males.
All is not Gold that Glitters. For male and females.
The Generous Jew. For six males.
Shopping. For three males and one female.
The Two Counselors. For three males.
The Votaries of Folly. For a number of females.
Aunt Betsy's Beaux. For four females and two males.
The Libel Suit. For two females and one male.
Santa Claus. For a number of boys.
Christmas Fairies. For several little girls.
The Three Rings. For two males.

Dime Dialogues, No. 7.

The Two Beggars. For fourteen females.
The Earth-Child in Fairy-Land. For girls.
Twenty Years Hence. Two females, one male.
The Way to Windham. For two males.
Woman. A Poetic Passage at Words. Two boys.
The 'Ologies. A Colloquy. For two males.
How to Get Rid of a Bore. For several boys.
Boarding-School. For two males and two females.
Plea for the Pledge. For two males.
The Ills of Dram-Drinking. For three boys.
True Pride. A Colloquy. For two females.
The Two Lecturers. For numerous males.
Two Views of Life. A Colloquy. For two females.
The Rights of Music. For two females.
A Hopeless Case. A Query in Verse. Two girls.
The Would-be School-Teacher. For two males.
Come to Life too Soon. For three males.
Eight O'clock. For two little girls.
True Dignity. A Colloquy. For two boys.
Grief too Expensive. For two males.
Hamlet and the Ghost. For two persons.
Little Red Riding Hood. For two females.
New Application of an Old Rule. Boys and girls.
Colored Cousins. A Colloquy. For two males.

Dime Dialogues, No. 8.

The Fairy School. For a number of girls.
The Enrolling Officer. For three girls and two boys.
The Base-ball Enthusiast. For three boys.
The Girl of the Period. For three girls.
The Fowl Rebellion. For two males and one female.
Slow but Sure. For several males and two females.
Caudle's Velocipede. For one male and one female.
The Figures. For several small children.
The Trial of Peter Sloper. For seven boys.
Getting a Photograph. For males and females.
The Society for General Improvement. For girls.
A Nobleman in Disguise. Three girls and six boys.
Great Expectations. For two boys.
Playing School. For five females and four males.
Clothes for the Heathen. For one male and one female.
A Hard Case. For three boys.
Ghosts. For ten females and one male.

Dime Dialogues, No. 9.

Advertising for Help. For a number of females.
America to England. Greeting. For two boys.
The Old and the New. For four females and one male.
Choice of Trades. For twelve little boys.
The Lap-Dog. For two females.
The Victim. For four females and one male.
The Duelist. For two boys.
The True Philosophy. For females and males.
A Good Education. For two females.
The Law of Human Kindness. For two females.
Spoiled Children. For a mixed school.
Brutus and Cassius.
Coriolanus and Aufidius.
The New Scholar. For a number of girls.
The Self-made Man. For three males.
The May Queen (No. 2). For a school.
Mrs. Lackland's Economy. For four boys and three girls.
Should Women be Given the Ballot? For boys.

Dime Dialogues, No. 10.

Mrs. Mark Twain's Shoe. For one male and one female.
The Old Flag. School Festival. For three boys.
The Court of Folly. For many girls.
Great Lives. For six boys and six girls.
Scandal. For numerous males and females.
The Light of Love. For two boys.
The Flower Children. For twelve girls.
The Deaf Uncle. For three boys.
A Discussion. For two boys.
The Rehearsal. For a school.
The True Way. For three boys and one girl.
A Practical Life Lesson. For three girls.
The Monk and the Soldier. For two boys.
1776-1876. School Festival. For two girls.
Lord Dundreary's Visit. For two males and two females.
Witches in the Cream. For 3 girls and 3 boys.
Frenchman. Charade. Numerous characters.

Dime Dialogues, No. 11.

Appearances are very Deceitful. For six boys.
The Conundrum Family. For male and female.
Curing Betsy. For three males and four females.
Jack and the Beanstalk. For five characters.
The Way to Do it and Not to Do it. For three females.
How to Become Healthy, etc. For one male and one female.
The Only True Life. For two girls.
Classic Colloquies. For two boys.
I. Gustavus Vasa and Cristiern.
II. Tamerlane and Bajazet.
Fashionable Dissipation. For two little girls.
A School Charade. For two boys and two girls.
Jean Ingelow's "Songs of Seven." For seven girls.
A Debate. For four boys.
Ragged Dick's Lesson. For three boys.
School Charade, with Tableau.
A Very Questionable Story. For two boys.
A Sell. For three males.
The Real Gentleman. For two boys.

Dime Dialogues, No. 12.

Yankee Assurance. For several characters.
Boarders Wanted. For several characters.
When I was Young. For two girls.
The Most Precious Heritage. For two boys.
The Double Cure. For two males and four females.
The Flower-garden Fairies. For five little girls.
Jemima's Novel. For three males and two females.
Beware of the Widows. For three girls.
A Family not to Pattern After. For ten characters.
How to Man-age. An acting charade.
The Vacation Escapade. For four boys and teacher.
That Naughty Boy. For three females and one male.
Mad-cap. An acting charade.
All is not Gold that Glitters. Acting proverb.
Sic Transit Gloria Mundi. Acting charade.

Dime Dialogues, No. 13.

Two O'clock in the Morning. For three males.
An Indignation Meeting. For several females.
Before and Behind the Scenes. Several characters.
The Noblest Boy. A number of boys and teacher.
Blue Beard. A Dress Piece. For girls and boys.
Not so Bad as it Seems. For several characters.
A Curbstone Moral. For two males and female.
Sense vs. Sentiment. For Parlor and Exhibition.
Worth, not Wealth. For four boys and a teacher.
No such Word as Fail. For several males.
The Sleeping Beauty. For a school.
An Innocent Intrigue. Two males and a female.
Old Nabby, the Fortune-teller. For three girls.
Boy-talk. For several little boys.
Mother is Dead. For several little girls.
A Practical Illustration. For two boys and girl.

Dime Dialogues, No. 14.

Mrs. Jonas Jones. For three gents and two ladies.
The Born Genius. For four gents.
More than One Listener. For four gents and lady.
Who on Airth is He? For three girls.
The Right not to be a Pauper. For two boys.
Woman Nature Will Out. For a girls' school.
Benedict and Bachelor. For two boys.
The Cost of a Dress. For five persons.
The Surprise Party. For six little girls.
A Practical Demonstration. For three boys.
Refinement. Acting charade. Several characters.
Conscience the Arbiter. For lady and gent.
How to Make Mothers Happy. For two girls.
A Conclusive Argument. For two boy speakers.
A Woman's Blindness. For three girls.
Rum's Work. (Temperance). For four gents.
The Fatal Mistake. For two young ladies.
Eyes and Nose. For one gent and one lady.
Retribution. For a number of boys.

Dime Dialogues, No. 15.

The Fairies' Escapade. Numerous characters.
A Poet's Perplexities. For six gentlemen.
A Home Cure. For two ladies and one gent.
The Good there is in Each. A number of boys.
Gentleman or Monkey. For two boys.
The Little Philosopher. For two little girls.
Aunt Polly's Lesson. For four ladies.
A Wind-fall. Acting Charade. For a number.
Will it Pay? For two boys.
The Heir-at-law. For numerous males.
Don't Believe What You Hear. For three ladies.
A Safety Rule. For three ladies.
The Chief's Resolve. Extract. For two males.
Testing her Friends. For several characters.
The Foreigner's Troubles. For two ladies.
The Cat Without an Owner. Several characters.
Natural Selection. For three gentlemen.

Dime Dialogues, No. 16.

Polly Ann. For four ladies and one gentleman.
The Meeting of the Winds. For a school.
The Good They Did. For six ladies.
The Boy Who Wins. For six gentlemen.
Good-by Day. A Colloquy. For three girls.
The Sick Well Man. For three boys.
The Investigating Committee. For nine ladies.
A "Corner" in Rogues. For four boys.
The Imps of the Trunk Room. For five girls.
The Boasters. A Colloquy. For two little girls.
Kitty's Funeral. For several little girls.
Stratagem. Charade. For several characters.
Testing Her Scholars. For numerous scholars.
The World is What We Make It. For two girls.
The Old and the New. For gentleman and lady.

Dime Dialogues, No. 17.

LITTLE FOLKS' SPEECHES AND DIALOGUES.

To be Happy You Must be Good. For two little girls and one boy.
Evanescent Glory. For a bevy of boys.
The Little Peacemaker. For two little girls.
What Parts Friends. For two little girls.
Martha Washington Tea Party. For five little girls in old-time costume.
The Evil There is in it. For two young boys.
Wise and Foolish Little Girl. For two girls.
A Child's Inquiries. For small child and teacher.
The Cooking Club. For two girls and others.
How to do it. For two boys.
A Hundred Years to Come. For boy and girl.
Don't Trust Faces. For several small boys.
Above the Skies. For two small girls.
The True Heroism. For three little boys.
Give Us Little Boys a Chance; The Story of the Gnu.
Puttling; I'll Be a Man; A Little Girl's Mother's Speech; Johnny's Opinions of Grandmother; The Boasting Hen; He Knows der Rest; A Small Boy's View of Corns; Robby's Sermon; Nobody's Child; Nutting at Grandpa Gray's; Little Boy's View of How Columbus Discovered America; Little Girl's View; Little Boy's Speech on Time; A Little Boy's Pocket; The Midnight Murder; Robby Rob's Second Sermon; How the Baby Came; A Boy's Observations: The New Slate; A Mother's Love; The Crownin' Glory; Baby Lulu; Josh Billings on the Bumble-bee, Wren, Alligator; Died Yesterday; The Chicken's Mistake; The Hair Apparent; Deliver Us from Evil; Don't Want to be Good; Only a Drunken Fellow; The Two Little Robins; Be Slow to Condemn; A Nonsense Tale; Little Boy's Declaration; A Child's Desire; Bogus; The Goblin Cat; Rub-a-dub; Calumny; Little Chatterbox; Where are They? A Boy's View; The Twenty Frogs; Going to School; A Morning Bath; The Girl of Dundee; A Fancy; In the Sunlight; The New-laid Egg; The Little Musician; Idle Ben; Pottery-man; Then and Now.

Dime Dialogues, No. 18.

Fairy Wishes. Several characters, male and female.
No Rose Without a Thorn. Two males, one female.
Too Greedy by Half. For three males.
One Good Turn Deserves Another. For six ladies.
Courting Melinda. For three boys and one lady.
The New Scholar. For several boys.
The Little Intercessor. For four ladies.
Antecedents. For three gentlemen and three ladies.
Give a Dog a Bad Name. For four gentlemen.
Spring-Time Wishes. For six little girls.
Lost Charlie; or, the Gipsy's Revenge. For numerous characters.
A little Tramp. For three little boys.
Hard Times. For two gentlemen and four ladies.
The Lesson Well Worth Learning. For two males and two females.

Dime Dialogues, No. 19.

An Awful Mystery. For two females and two males.
Contentment. For five little boys.
Who are the Saints? For three young girls.
California Uncle. For 3 males and 3 females.
Be Kind to the Poor. A little folks' play.
How People are Insured. A "duet."
Mayor. Acting Charade. For four characters.
The Smoke Fiend. For four boys.
A Kindergarten Dialogue. For a Christmas Festival.
Personated by seven characters.
The Use of Study. For three girls.
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Remember Benson. For three males.
Modern Education. Three males and one female.
Mad With Too Much Lore. For three males.
The Fairy's Warning. Dress Piece. For two girls.
Aunt Eunice's Experiment. For several.
The Mysterious G. G. For 2 females and 1 male.
We'll Have to Mortgage the Farm. For one male and two females.
An Old-Fashioned Duet.
The Auction. For numerous characters.

Dime Dialogues, No. 20.

The Wrong Man. For three males and three females.
Afternoon Calls. For two little girls.
Ned's Present. For four boys.
Judge Not. For teacher and several scholars.
Telling Dreams. For four little folks.
Saved by Love. For two boys.
Mistaken Identity. For two males and three females.
Couldn't Read English. For three males, one female.
A Little Vesuvius. For six little girls.
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An Air Castle. For five males and three females.
City Manners and Country Hearts. For three girls and one boy.
The Silly Dispute. For two girls and teacher.
Not One There! For four male characters.
Foot-print. For numerous characters.
Keeping Boarders. For two females and three males.
A Cure for Good. For one lady and two gentlemen.
The Credulous Wise-Acre. For two males.

Dime Dialogues, No. 21.

A Successful Donation Party. For several.
Out of Debt Out of Danger. For three males and three females.
Little Red-Riding Hood. For two children.
How She Made Him Propose. A duet.
The House on the Hill. For four females.
Evidence enough. For two males.
Worth and Wealth. For four females.
Waterfall. For several.

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